

Codex Sassoon: The Earliest Most Complete Hebrew Bible

Sotheby's, London

22nd to 28th February, 2023

Reviewed by

Adam R. Hemmings

Fellow, Royal Asiatic Society

It is rather unusual to conduct an exhibition review of a display for a buying audience. In fact, some would say such an endeavour is taboo, given the problematic ethical concerns stemming from such sales – especially of unprovenanced or unconvincingly provenanced objects – at prominent auction houses such as Sotheby's and Christie's.¹ Even so, to ignore the display of artefacts like these when they are particularly important to a discipline would be akin to burying one's head only partially in the sand, so the eyes cannot see, but the ears can hear. Moreover, some items, such as Codex Sassoon considered in the following review, obtain happier ends: In this case the volume was purchased by, and is currently displayed at, ANU – Museum of the Jewish People, Tel Aviv, Israel.

Codex Sassoon is a copy of the Masoretic Text, likely dating to the 10th century CE. It represents the most complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible from such an early period. As such, it is extraordinarily important, but even more so because of its palimpsestic nature, with inscriptions and annotations made over the centuries, providing unique glimpses into the communities through which it passed.

Codex Sassoon: The Earliest Most Complete Hebrew Bible was mounted in London at Sotheby's between the 22nd and 28th February, 2023, with a further worldwide tour to Tel Aviv, Dallas, Los Angeles, and New York City (where it was auctioned on 16th May, 2023). As an exhibition primarily intended to promote the sale of the Codex, it was given singular focus. The gallery space was dimly lit, save for the book illuminated from above with a broad warm spotlight. The subdued lighting endowed the space with an almost reverential atmosphere, for whilst no enforcement of silence was present, the audience was reduced to the hushed whispers normally reserved for places of great sanctity. This was certainly a successful curatorial decision, elevating the text from book to an object embedded with further meaning.

¹ See, for example, the recent cases noted in Ralph Blumenthal and Tom Mashberg, "Officials Are Set to Seize Antiquity," *The New York Times*, April 4, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/05/arts/design/ancient-cambodian-statue-is-seized-from-sothebys.html> and Vincent Noce, "French Court Orders Christie's to Restitute a Nazi-Looted Painting Sold in London," *The Art Newspaper*, February 1, 2023, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2023/02/01/french-court-orders-christies-to-restitute-a-nazi-looted-painting-sold-in-london>.

Correspondence should be addressed to Adam R. Hemmings at 603907@alumni.soas.ac.uk.

©2024 Adam R. Hemmings. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction, provided the original author and source are credited.



Figure 1 (Author's Photograph)

Codex Sassoon sat elevated upon a dark pink-red plinth, encased in a vitrine (Figure 1). A prominent sign in royal blue with white text was raised directly behind the plinth and individually lit with a narrow beam, proclaiming the title of the exhibition alongside the scheduled auction date, the entire sign surmounted with a stylised crown, below which unpointed Hebrew text read *kātab Sassoon* (Book/Codex Sassoon). This title, crown, and Hebrew text were also reflected upon the base of the plinth, the crown an allusion to the tradition of Torah Crowns, which often grace the tops of the scrolls in a metaphorical crowning, conveying the sovereignty of the law. The Codex was opened to two pages, which periodically changed dependent on day and (apparently) by request. On the day this author visited, a selection from Chronicles was displayed (Figure 2).



Figure 2 (Author's Photograph)

As noted in the supplementary materials, Codex Sassoon emerged as a repository of rich textual elements, highlighting punctuation, vocalisation, cantillation marks, and the marginal notes of the Masorah. These annotations not only prescribed the traditional writing and reading methods but also unveiled a profound narrative of Judaism's evolution and the broader shift from oral to written traditions. Spanning centuries, its inscriptions serve as links to the Levant during the Middle Ages, where they provide intriguing glimpses into the Codex's journey, tracing its passage from one custodian to another. Initially, it passed from the hands of Khalaf ben Abraham to Isaac ben Ezekiel al-Attar, who subsequently bequeathed ownership to his sons, Ezekiel and Maimon. By the 13th century, the Codex found sanctuary in the synagogue of Makisin, believed to be situated in modern-day Markada, Syria. Here, it likely underwent its inaugural rebinding. However, the tranquillity of Makisin was ephemeral, as historical upheavals swept through the region. Whether ravaged by the Mongol Empire in the 13th century or the Timurid Empire in 1400, the

town succumbed to destruction, prompting the Codex's guardianship to pass into the hands of Salama ibn Abi al-Fakhr for safekeeping.²

To the left of the display, a solitary text panel provided interpretation of the Codex, from the general to the particular. Starting with the centrality of "the Bible" as a whole and its importance across the three monotheisms, it went on to explain the structure of the Hebrew Bible, the Christian inclusion of these books as integral parts of the canons of various denominations, and the Muslim belief that the Torah and Psalms are divinely inspired. The text explained that Codex Sassoon dates to roughly 900 CE and is notable due to the inclusion of all the books of the Hebrew Bible accompanied by punctuation, vowels, and accents (that is, the Masoretic Text). Finally, it told of the Codex's prior accessioning into the collection of David Solomon Sassoon (1880–1942) as a part of his "Ohel Dawid" (Tent of David) or collection catalogue (Figure 3). This simple panel provided the layperson a decent overview of the history and significance of the Codex but was lacking in further development one might usually expect from a traditional museum exhibition, which is understandably absent from an auction display.³



*Figure 3 David Solomon Sassoon (1880–1942)
(Public Domain Photograph)*

Neither the exhibition nor ancillary material noted the peculiar features of the text itself. Scribal errors abound, including missing diacritics and spelling mistakes.⁴ This information must be considered historically important, for rather than a text of holy perfection as presented by Sotheby's within the exhibition, this is the work of a scribe, struggling to take the text and transcribe it for the age. This breathes a humanity into the Codex as a work of knowledge and labour bounded by the proficiencies of those who penned its pages so many centuries ago.

² For further details, see Will Fenstermaker, "The Remarkable History of Codex Sassoon," Sothebys.com, February 15, 2023, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/sassoon-codex-oldest-most-complete-hebrew-bible>.

³ Sotheby's provides a large amount of additional material online, as noted above.

⁴ See, for example, Ellis Brotzman, *Old Testament Textual Criticism: A Practical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1993), 58.

Codex Sassoon: The Earliest Most Complete Hebrew Bible provided visitors with the rare opportunity to encounter what until now had been a gated object – outside the purview of the public’s gaze. But the audience for such a display, even with free access, remains chiefly those with an interest in purchasing the object, potentially locking it away into private vaults once again. It is therefore fortunate that it will continue to be displayed, with deeper interpretative material, including interactive stations and two short films, allowing for a fuller engagement at ANU – Museum of the Jewish People.⁵

⁵ “Codex Sassoon at ANU – Museum of the Jewish People,” Museum of the Jewish People, January 9, 2024, <https://www.anumuseum.org.il/codex-sassoon/>.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Blumenthal, Ralph, and Tom Mashberg. "Officials Are Set to Seize Antiquity." *The New York Times*, April 4, 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/05/arts/design/ancient-cambodian-statue-is-seized-from-sothebys.html>.

Brotzman, Ellis. *Old Testament Textual Criticism: A Practical Introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1993.

"Codex Sassoon at ANU - Museum of the Jewish People." *Museum of the Jewish People*, January 9, 2024. <https://www.anumuseum.org.il/codex-sassoon/>.

Fenstermaker, Will. "The Remarkable History of Codex Sassoon." *Sothebys.com*, February 15, 2023. <https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/sassoon-codex-oldest-most-complete-hebrew-bible>.

Noce, Vincent. "French Court Orders Christie's to Restitute a Nazi-Looted Painting Sold in London." *The Art Newspaper*, February 1, 2023. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2023/02/01/french-court-orders-christies-to-restitute-a-nazi-looted-painting-sold-in-london>.