

Misidentified Torah Scroll  
by Quincey Prickett

Handwritten Torah scrolls are very important and interesting artifacts that follow particular halakha and usually fall into three traditions: Ashkenazi, Sephardic, and Yemenite. HCU Dunham Bible Museum has a Torah scroll on display that is misidentified as a 16th century Yemenite scroll. However, the scroll is not Yemenite, but Sephardic as I will show.

When I chose the Torah scroll to be the subject of my research paper I was excited to write about the history of Jews in Yemen. In 2014-2015 Yemen had a civil war that ended in the expulsion of the Jews from Yemen. Many Torah scrolls were smuggled out of Yemen to protect them from being destroyed by the Islamic aggression of the new government. There are significantly fewer Yemenite scrolls than the other traditions and finding a Yemenite scroll that came out of Yemen during or after the civil war would be very exciting. If HCU had such an artifact in the museum it would be an extremely rare find. I asked Dr. Severance when and where HCU obtained the scroll.

Dr. Severance informed me that the scroll is on loan from Sagemont church. I reached out to Sagemont to try and get information about when and how they came to possess the scroll. Sadly, no one at Sagemont knew anything about the scroll because it was donated before anyone currently on their staff was employed. They gave me the email of the former pastor of Sagemont and told me to ask him for information. I emailed him multiple times but received no response. So after a month of reaching out and not receiving any information about the scroll, I reached out

to Dr. Severance again who told me that HCU received the scroll in 2007. This means that the scroll could not have been part of the recent turmoil in Yemen as HCU had possession of it before the civil war. Dr. Severance also informed me that someone online emailed her and notified her that the scroll was not Yemenite because the spacing was wrong.

So in the interest of academic integrity, I spoke to Dr. Severance about getting permission to examine the scroll personally and verify a few things. I gained access to the scroll on March 19, 2025. While examining it, I discovered that the scroll is not Yemenite but Sephardic! Scrolls follow unique traditions that allow for identification such as spacing between certain words, decorative letters, larger or smaller letters in certain locations, and occasionally spelling variations. Yemenite scrolls follow a 51-line per-column format and our scroll follows a 42-line per-column format. The 42-line per-column format is used by the Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews but not the Yemenite Jews. So I have concluded conclusively that Dunham's scroll is not Yemenite. However, knowing that the scroll is not Yemenite does not tell us what the scroll is, only what it is not.

So what are the primary differences between an Ashkenazi scroll and a Sephardic scroll? In the setting of the synagogue, the differences are obvious because the scrolls are decorated and stored differently. How would someone discern what a scroll is outside of its synagogue context? Are there other notable differences? Yes! There are two major differences, even though the general format is identical.

The first difference is the style of the letters themselves. The Ashkenazi scrolls use three different forms of writing: Beis Yosef Writing, HaAdmor Hazaken, or Ari Writing. These are more elaborate and calligraphic styles of handwriting while the Sephardic use Vellish writing or

Mor V'ktziah which are less elaborate. To give an analogy of the difference it would be like comparing calligraphic cursive to print, manuscript, or block writing.

The second difference is the spelling of words that end in silent aleph א or heh ה.

Phonetically there is no difference in how the words would sound, but I am not dealing solely with phonetic sounds but the manuscript origin. When a word ends in a silent aleph א the Ashkenazi will sometimes change the spelling of the word to end in silent heh ה, while the rest of the Jewish communities leave the word ending in a silent aleph א. There are three places where the Ashkenazi changed the spelling of such words to end in the silent heh ה which are:

Deuteronomy 23:2(Jewish address but the Christian address is 23:1), Psalms 90:3, and Isaiah 57:15. However only the Deuteronomy verse is in the Torah scroll in question. The manuscript in question has the Sephardic reading and spacing. So I have concluded that the scroll in question is Sephardic. As far as the date, I lack the technical skills to date the scroll but I can conclude that it is not Yemenite and it is not Ashkenazi. This means that the most likely conclusion is that the scroll is Sephardic, though I recommend having a professional textual critic of the Torah examine the scroll to verify my research.

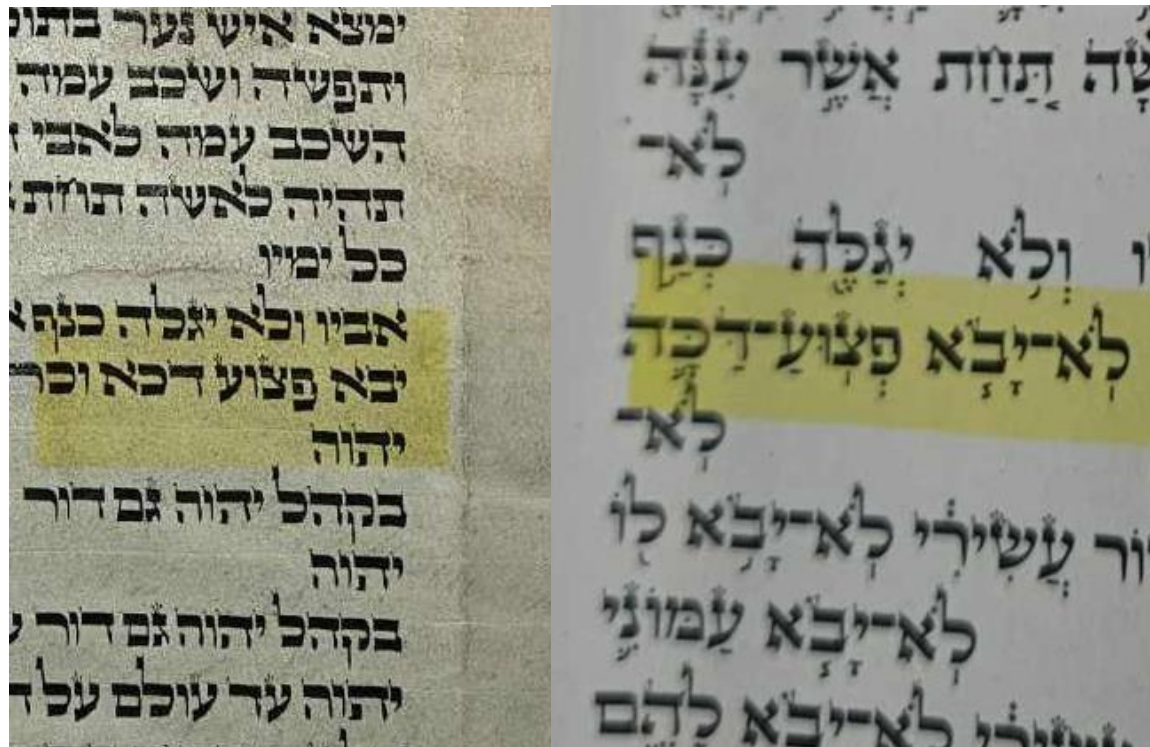
Deuteronomy 23:2 (Sephardic) לֹא- יִבְאֶפְצוּ ע - דָּכָא

Dueteronomy 23:2 (Ashkenazi) לֹא- יִבְאֶפְצוּ ע - דָּכָה

Even though the scroll is not Yemenite, it is still a marvelous scroll that follows the scribal halakha. The scroll is written on animal skin in carbon ink. It is an unpointed Masoretic scroll, meaning that it does not have niqquid. Many of the pages are older than others. Scrolls are made by sewing multiple sheets of velum together, and when a sheet becomes damaged it can be removed and replaced by a new sheet. The section on display in the museum is Exodus 15 and it

is a newer sheet than many of the older sheets in Leviticus through Deuteronomy. The scroll may be 16th-century as advertised even if it is not Yemenite.

In conclusion, The Dunham Bible Museum has a beautiful Torah scroll even if it is misidentified. The scroll is a kosher Torah scroll that can be used in any synagogue around the world. Parts of the scroll show clear wear and tear from centuries of use. HCU should be grateful for the scroll and continue to display it, but revise the information that is being given concerning the manuscript. It is my recommendation that HCU should also have a professional scholar look at the scroll to both date and verify my research. Though I know some basic differences which I explained previously, I do not have the technical skills to properly date the scroll or verify the handwriting. I cannot tell for certain if the handwriting is Vellish though it appears to be so in my amateur opinion. I can tell for certain that it is not Yemenite or Ashkenazi, which makes Sephardic the most likely conclusion. I pray that my initial research prompts HCU to further examine the scroll and verify my conclusion.



(Scroll on the left is HCU's and the one on the right is Ashkenazi. The highlighted area is Deuteronomy 23:2.)

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