

# CESTA research anthology 2022

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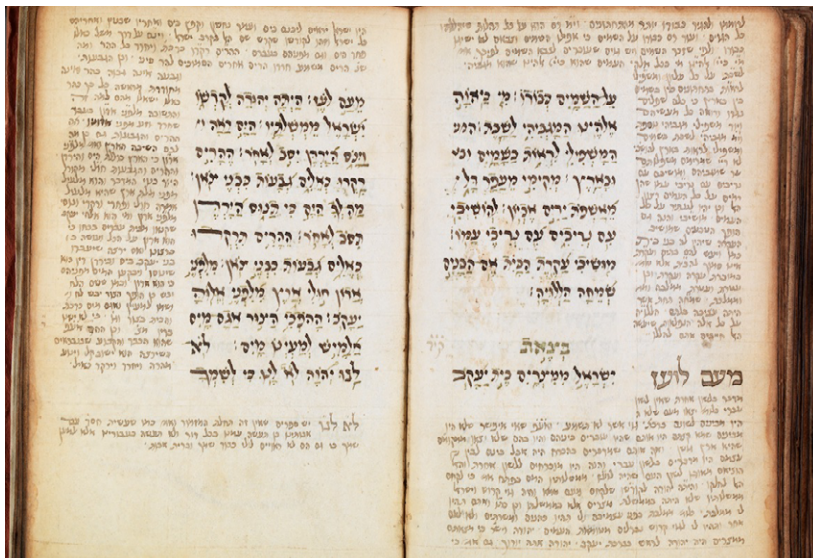
# The Evolving Psalter

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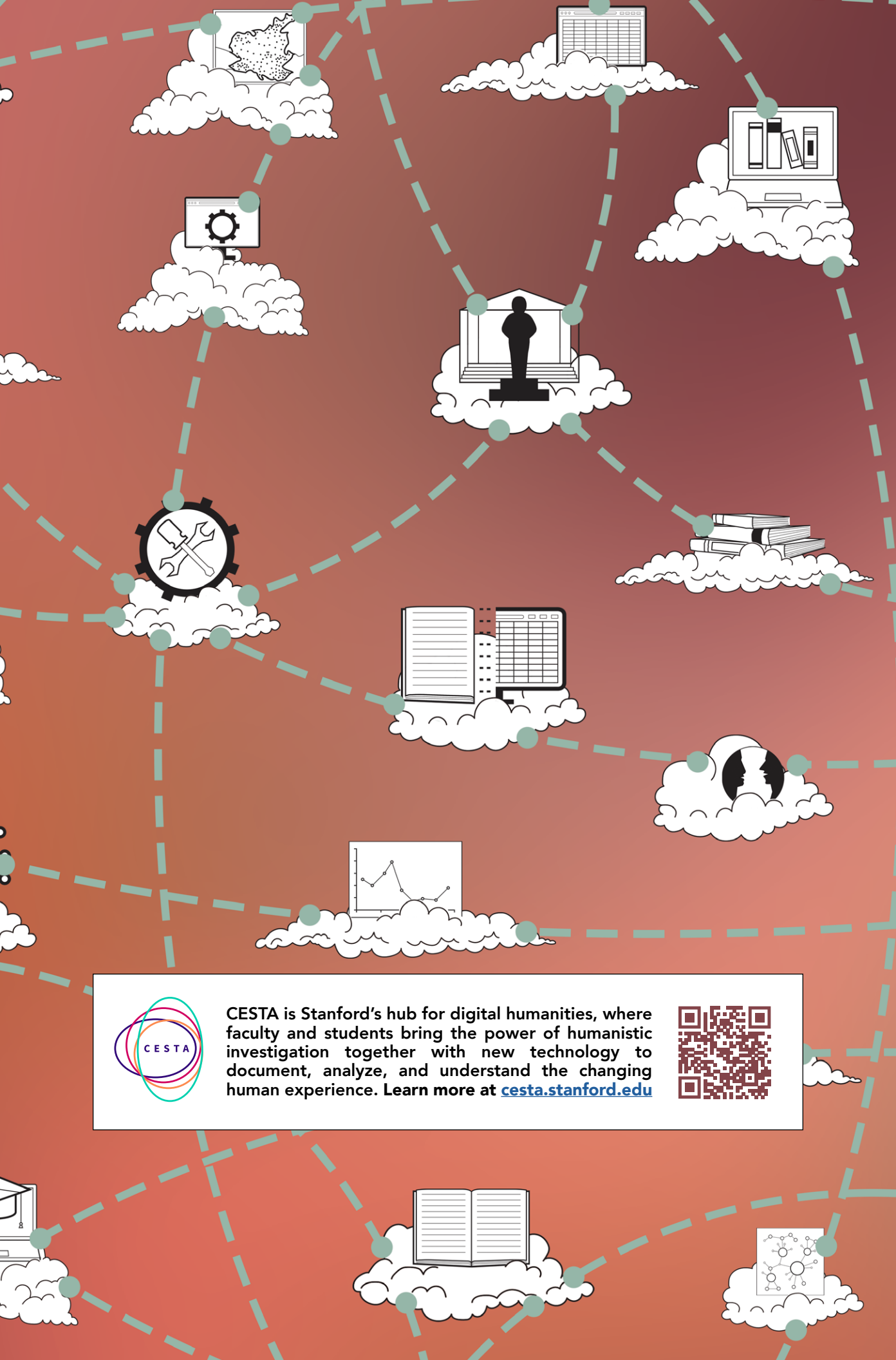
Prior to the invention of the printing press, each biblical manuscript varied from all others in ways both large and small. In the case of the book of Psalms, small changes had large consequences, as adding or omitting divisions between individual psalms created entirely new compositions. Recent work has begun to show that this type of variation was much more prevalent among medieval Hebrew manuscripts of the Psalms than previously recognized, and this project seeks to make a quantitative assessment of the available data and draw out their implications.

The first phase of the project compiled and assessed variation in a corpus of nearly 400 manuscripts. The analysis showed a stunning variety of different segmentations of the Psalms—that is, different ways the overall text of the book could be divided into constituent compositions. As such, it also revealed new psalms within the text of the familiar Psalter. In light of these findings, I proposed a new way of conceptualizing the Psalms based on population-level thinking developed in evolutionary biology—not as a single, fixed text but as a collective phenomenon whose full potential for diversity cannot be expressed in any one exemplar.

In the second phase, my research intern Chana Lanter and I expanded the dataset to correlate manuscript variation with information about the date, location, and scribe of each manuscript (where such data was available). We hope to provide deeper explanations for why and where variation occurred and where it did not. In general, the project suggests that the Psalms, far from being a closed corpus of fixed and stable compositions, are in reality formed and reformed in coordination with the communities who receive, read, and pass them on.



MS Parm 1871, a 13<sup>th</sup>-c. Italian Psalter held in the Biblioteca Palatina in Parma, Italy. Leaf 174 shows text from Psalms 113–115 surrounded by David Kimchi's commentary. Image source: Biblioteca Palatina, Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, Italy.



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