

Joseph Hacker and Adam Shear, eds. *The Hebrew Book in Early Modern Italy*.

Jewish Culture and Contexts. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. vi + 326 pp. \$69.95. ISBN: 978-0-8122-4352-9.

This learned and stimulating collection of essays — emerging from a research group on the history of Jewish material texts at the University of Pennsylvania’s Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies — provides many new perspectives on the production and consumption of Hebrew books, both in print and manuscript, over four centuries. Although its first two chapters (by Evelyn Cohen and Nurit Pasternak, respectively) are devoted to fifteenth-century Hebrew manuscripts, the volume — all of whose chapters cannot be discussed in this brief review — is devoted primarily to printed works, as is entirely appropriate. In their lucid and wide-ranging introduction Hacker and Shear cite Brian Richardson’s observation concerning the “profound consequences” of “the introduction of the printing press to Italy in or shortly before 1465 . . . for all users of the written word.” From that point books “became available in much larger quantities than before, they cost much less, and texts could thus be disseminated more quickly and more widely” (7–8). They see this description as “also an accurate assessment” of Hebrew printing in Italy, which was “the central focus for Hebrew book production” throughout the world from the late fifteenth century through the middle of the sixteenth century, and for another two centuries “remained one of the most important centers of Jewish printing” (10). Drawing on the work of A. K. Offenberg on Hebrew incunabula they note that of nearly 140 separate editions produced before 1500 by forty different presses, “more than 60 percent of those presses were in Italy” (197n4).

Hebrew books were printed in Rome already before 1472, and soon Hebrew printing presses were established both north and south of the Eternal City, even in such small towns as Reggio di Calabria, Soncino, and Casalmaggiore. It was in Reggio that Rashi’s commentary on the Pentateuch was first published (in 1475), and in Soncino during the following decade that members of the eponymous Jewish printing family first published individual tractates of the Babylonian Talmud, surrounded by the commentaries of Rashi and the Tosephists. In 1486 they published what was

probably the first Passover Haggadah printed in Italy, and in that same year they completed publication of a Mahzor according to the Roman rite, the first edition of that prayer book ever printed. Neither of these 1486 works is mentioned in the volume under review, an unfortunately inevitable consequence of such collections.

Considerably more attention, however, is devoted to editions of the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud, particularly those produced in Venice by the Bomberg Press. Although the Soncinos were the first printers in Italy to publish a single volume of the Talmud as well as the first to publish an entire Hebrew Bible, they were eventually outdone in both categories by the Antwerp-born Daniel Bomberg (or van Bomberghen), who set up shop in Venice early in the sixteenth century. Over some four decades his press produced more than 200 beautifully printed Hebrew books, including three editions of the Rabbinic Bible, with the Aramaic Targum and medieval commentaries. Somewhat ironically, this devout Christian was the first to print the entire Babylonian Talmud.

Bomberg's background and publishing priorities are discussed in two consecutive chapters by Bruce Nielsen and David Stern, both of whom draw upon the work of Jordan Penkower, particularly his still-unpublished Hebrew University dissertation. Nielsen sees Bomberg as "a bookman of two worlds" (56), stressing the publisher's hybrid identity as a Flemish entrepreneur in Venice and a Christian publisher of Hebraica. Following Penkower, he notes that Bomberg, despite being Christian, was strongly influenced "toward embracing Kabbalah" (75) by Jacob ibn Adoniyahu, the editor of his second Rabbinic Bible (1525), who himself later converted to Christianity. Stern also cites Penkower's related argument that the latter's desire to publish a more complete Massoretic apparatus than was available in Bomberg's first Rabbinic Bible (1517) was rooted in his belief that the Massorah was linked with Kabbalistic secrets.

Another devout Christian who played an important, though less direct, role in the dissemination of medieval Jewish biblical commentaries was the Tuscan-born Jesuit (and future saint) Robert Bellarmine. Following the burning of the Talmud in Rome and other Italian cities in 1553, initiated by the Roman Inquisition, the fate of Jewish Bible commentaries remained to be determined. During the 1570s Bellarmine taught himself Hebrew while teaching in Louvain and sometime afterward composed a still unpublished Latin essay on the "Errors of Rabbi Salomon [Rashi] in the Five Books of Moses." Although Bellarmine believed that he had detected not only errors, but also blasphemies and obscenities in Rashi's commentary, his approach, as impressively reconstructed by Piet van Boxel (chapter 6), favored expurgation rather than burning of such exegetical works, since he saw them as potentially more useful to Christian scholars than was the more legalistic Talmud.

Van Boxel's chapter is appropriately preceded by an equally illuminating one by Hacker on "Sixteenth-Century Internal Censorship of Hebrew Books," including Azariah de' Rossi's pioneering and controversial *Light of the Eyes*, which drew on more than 150 Jewish sources (excluding rabbinic literature) and more than 100 non-Jewish sources, mostly in Latin and Italian. In her chapter on "Dangerous Reading in Early Modern Modena" Federica Francesconi attempts, on the basis of inquisitional

sources, to reconstruct the library of De' Rossi's younger contemporary Moisè Modena (1539–1630), which similarly included a wide range of Jewish and non-Jewish works, but not the Talmud itself, which had recently been burned publicly. Among the latter category Francesconi cites Alessandro Vellutello's commentary on Petrarch's poetry and *Prose di Pietro Bembo*, both published in Venice in 1525, the very same year in which Bomberg's second Rabbinic Bible appeared there. The later presence of these humanistic volumes in the home of a Modenese Jew and the Christian printer's prior engagement with the esoteric Kabbalism of his Jewish editor together encapsulate the range of issues addressed in this rich volume.

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