

12-31-2007

Iakerson, Shimon. Catalogue of Hebrew Incunabula from the Collection of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. New York and Jerusalem: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2004–2005.

Barry D. Walfish

University of Toronto, barry.walfish@utoronto.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ajlpublishing.org/jl>

 Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#), [Information Literacy Commons](#), [Jewish Studies Commons](#), and the [Reading and Language Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Walfish, Barry D.. 2007. "Iakerson, Shimon. Catalogue of Hebrew Incunabula from the Collection of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. New York and Jerusalem: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2004–2005.." *Judaica Librarianship* 13: 47-49. doi:[10.14263/2330-2976.1086](https://doi.org/10.14263/2330-2976.1086).

Iakerson, Shimon. *Catalogue of Hebrew Incunabula from the Collection of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America*. New York and Jerusalem: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2004–2005. Vol. 1 (58, 389, 77, 316 p.); Vol. 2 (281, 253 p.). \$800. ISBN 9654560399 (vol. 1), 9654560429 (vol. 2).

Reviewed by Barry Dov Walfish, University of Toronto Library, Toronto, Ontario

The Jewish Theological Seminary of America ranks among the premier Judaica libraries in the world. Its collections of rare books and manuscripts are unsurpassed in breadth and depth. Yet, up until recently, these priceless treasures were hidden from the public eye, since they had never been properly cataloged or described in published form. Finally, this situation is being remedied, with the publication of the first of what promises to be a series of catalogs describing the library's holdings. The administration of the Library and of the Seminary are to be congratulated for this initiative, which promises to fill a major gap in the world of Hebraic bibliography and booklore. This first catalog of incunabula in the Library's possession certainly does justice to the subject. Composed by Shimon Iakerson, Senior Researcher at the Institute for Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg, Russia, it provides a detailed description of the Library's holdings as well as a detailed introduction to the field and much more.

The production is quite lavish, filling two weighty tomes with 1,316 pages of glossy paper (weighing over twelve pounds), in a boxed set bound in an attractive cloth binding. It seems that no cost has been spared to produce a fine quality product that does justice to its subject. Indeed, producing the work in bilingual, Hebrew-English format must have added considerably to the costs of production.

The field of incunabula is one of the most active areas of study in the discipline of book history. It is estimated that from the appearance of the first Gutenberg Bible in 1454 to 1500, the end of the "cradle period" in printed book history, approximately 40,000 titles were produced in 20,000,000 copies. By contrast, Hebrew printing started considerably later (ca. 1470), and in the course of thirty years between 140 and 150 titles were produced in 30,000 copies (assuming 200 to 400 copies per edition). Thus, we are dealing with a very limited field, one in which a great deal of uncertainty still prevails, because of the lack of adequate information about dates and places of printing, and the activities of the pioneering printers in the field.

Hebrew incunabula were produced primarily in Italy, but also in Spain, Portugal, and Turkey. Our knowledge of Italian incunabula is much more complete than it is for those of Spanish or Portuguese provenance, since for the latter two countries the evidence is spotty and often only fragments of volumes have survived the vicissitudes of history. Research in the field is ongoing and new discoveries are still being made.

The introduction offers an up-to-date overview of the state of incunabula research and is a most welcome addition to the literature. Shimon Iakerson is one of the leading experts in this field and his opinions on disputed questions are certain to be considered seriously by his colleagues. Following the survey the author provides a description of the JTS collection, its history and present situation. The collection began with donations by Judge Mayer Sulzberger and the scholar and bibliophile Elkan Nathan Adler, and grew under the curatorship of the great scholar and bibliographer Alexander Marx. It is remarkable that the JTS has copies or fragments of 127 of the 140-plus Hebrew incunabula known to exist, a truly extraordinary collection, the largest in the world. This makes the JTS the major center for the study of Hebrew incunabula. The fact that many titles are held in several copies makes the collection even more valuable, as it enables comparison in situ of different copies, which often possess significant variations that reveal information about book production in the early days of the process.

The most important part of the book, of course, is the descriptions and these are done according to the highest standards, as set out in the authoritative works on incunabula in general and Hebrew incunabula in particular. For each title, the following elements are included:

- (1) a short bibliographic description;
- (2) a detailed typographic description, including: size, number of leaves, collation, number of columns, number of lines, text space, space between columns, average text density, presence or absence of running headers, presence or absence of catchwords, and quire signatures; also indicated are special signs such as punctuation marks, justification devices, and the form used for the Tetragrammaton; then follows a characterization of the typefaces used (if more than one) and a description and characterization of any decorations in the text;

- (3) citations from the text, including incipit and explicits of several quires as well as colophons describing the work of the various persons involved in the printing process: typesetters, correctors, etc.;
- (4) special characteristics of each copy, including number of leaves, missing leaves, general physical condition, printing material (paper or vellum), citations of ownership, handwritten notes, censorship marks, and binding description; and
- (5) bibliographic citations of the relevant literature.

Marginal notes in printed books are often of great historical and bibliographic interest and importance. One outstanding example from a JTS book is copy 96a of the Torah with Targum Onkelos and Rashi's commentary, published in Hajar, Spain in 1490. This copy is full of marginal notes on the Masorah which were made from the Keter Aram Tsovah, the famous Aleppo Codex of the Hebrew Bible. This codex barely escaped destruction in 1947 during anti-Semitic riots in Aleppo, but most of the Torah section was lost. The notes in the JTS copy of the Hajar Torah have been used by scholars to reconstruct the text of the Aleppo Codex for the missing parts of the Torah, thus providing invaluable information to biblical scholarship.

As mentioned earlier, the catalog is bilingual, with Hebrew being the primary language. This makes good sense, since the principal user community comprises Hebrew-speaking bibliographers and bibliophiles who will be comfortable reading the Hebrew text. But the English translation will make the book accessible to a much wider audience of scholars of the history of the book and printing, who may not necessarily read Hebrew but wish to learn about Hebrew incunables. Some material such as quotations from the books and incipits and explicits are found only in the Hebrew section, which again is quite reasonable.

In addition, the plates that accompany each entry are situated in the Hebrew section and have captions only in Hebrew. This I feel was an error. It would have been better to have all the plates in a separate section in the middle of the book with captions in both languages.

The catalog is rounded out with a full set of indexes in both languages which include: Titles cataloged; Titles mentioned; Persons (authors, commentators, translators); Printers, craftsmen, and their contemporaries; Owners; Censors; Watermarks; Copies printed on parchment; Places;

Scholars noted in the introduction and in the descriptions; and a Comparative table to other catalogs.

There is no question that this catalog is a major contribution to the field and will be consulted for years to come. What follows are a few of its shortcomings.

The weight of the volumes is a problem. Volume 1, which weighs six and a half pounds is too heavy for the binding. Evidence for this is the fact that my copy arrived with the binding broken. It would have been preferable to have printed the book on high-quality acid-free paper, and have only the plates on glossy paper. This would have reduced the weight considerably. Alternatively, three volumes could have been produced instead of two. For a set that sells for \$800, the additional cost would not have been that significant.

I was disappointed in the lack of attention in the English section to the use of diacritics. The under-dot for *h[.]et* for instance is used only on rare occasions (e.g., see p. 8, lines 6, 10), but for the most part is neglected. The same applies to diacritics for 'ayin and 'alef, which are seldom used. One would have expected a publication produced to such exacting bibliographic standards to pay attention to such details.

Another disappointment is the general state of the English translation and the bibliography, both of which are riddled with errors. In general the English translation is acceptable, but far too often there are slipups, infelicities of translation, or outright mistranslations that could have been avoided if the translation had been properly edited by knowledgeable editors. In a specialized field such as this, knowledge of classical Hebrew texts is essential. Some of colophons present great challenges to the translator and on several occasions in this book, the translation falls short.

For example, on page xxii of the introduction, in lines 3–4 of the colophon at the bottom of the page, “they will find none other than their staff in hand,” should read something like “they cannot find it because their hands have buckled [*me-asher maṭah yadam*]” (i.e., they are impoverished; based on Leviticus 25:35). On the following page, line 3–4, “he who has not to be able to buy” should be “he who cannot afford to buy.”

On page xxvi, line 11, “On 6 Elul on 10 of the year . . .” should be “On 16 Elul of the year . . .”

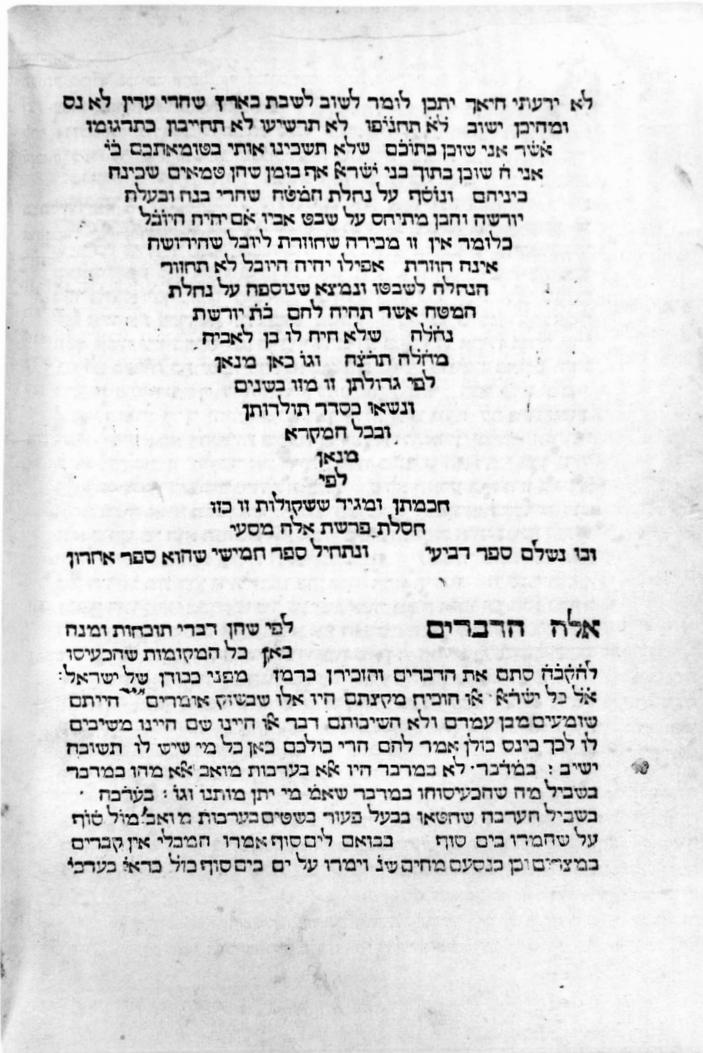
On page xxxiii, lines 4–5, “the year and come with singing (*be-rinah*) unto Zion with groaning Israel,” should be “the groaning people Israel will come to Zion with joy [*u-va'u Tsiyon be-rinah 'am*”

Yisra'el ha-ne'enaqim,” this being a typical expression of hope for the coming of the messianic era.

These are only a few of the worst examples. Also in a sad state is the bibliography, which contains numerous typographical errors, and inconsistencies in bibliographic and typographical format. And to think that it was reproduced twice, once in the English section, once in the Hebrew. Such sloppiness in a volume produced by any library, let alone one of the stature and reputation of JTS is difficult to comprehend and in the end, inexcusable. (To mention only one example, the name of the well-known bibliographer and historian of the Hebrew book, Mordechai Glatzer is consistently

spelled Glazer throughout the book, even though his name is cited correctly in the acknowledgments.)

In conclusion, this catalog of incunabula is a most welcome addition to the scholarly literature on the subject, one that opens up to the world the vast riches of a great Judaic Library. We look forward to future publications describing the manuscripts and other treasures of the JTS Library and can only hope that greater attention will be paid in the future to accurate translation, editing, proof-reading, and bibliographic consistency, so that the final products will be ones of which this fine institution can truly be proud.



Solomon ben Isaac (Rashi; 1040–1105). Commentary on the Pentateuch. [Rome: Obadiah, Menasseh, and Benjamin of Rome, ca. 1469–1472].

(Source: Shimon Iakerson, *Catalogue of Hebrew Incunabula from the Collection of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America*, item no. 4.)