

Barcelona's Olympian Haggadah

Not only is today Good Friday, it is also the beginning of Passover. As Jews prepare for tonight's ritual seder, Liz Sagues reports on a Haggadah — the seder prayer book — with a difference.

MICHAEL FALTER looks towards his young son. "Gideon would be able to read out of that manuscript. It is not just a picture book, not just a beautiful object. It is something you can use."

The book in question was produced more than 600 years ago, splendidly illuminated in the monastic Christian tradition with narrative scenes and fabulous creatures. But the Barcelona Haggadah celebrates a different religion, and is as practical a prayer book today, its producer-in-facsimile emphasises, as it was for the unknown Jew who commissioned it in 14th century Spain.

The key lies in its language. "Hebrew has not evolved as a language; 500-year-old Hebrew can be understood by anyone who knows modern Hebrew."

That was one of the attractions that the British Library's collection of medieval Hebrew manuscripts held for Falter. "I was just wandering round and saw all these beautiful manuscripts behind glass. I was upset that was all I would be able to see, and that is where I got the idea to reproduce these treasures, so people would not just be able to see them but also to own a copy." And, if they were practising Jews, use it.

From idea to reality has been a slow business, but it has become a business, operated from the Falter home in Hamilton Terrace, St John's Wood. The idle thought of the late 1970s became a positive plan in the early 1980s, but it was not until this year that one of those British Library manuscripts was reproduced under the imprint of Facsimile Editions.

First facsimile was the Kennicott Bible, a slightly later masterpiece of medieval Spanish Hebrew calligraphy and illumination, commissioned in La Coruna in 1476, and now one of the treasures of the Bodleian Library at Oxford.

"It chose itself," says Falter. He and Linda, who was to become his wife and partner in the facsimile business, went to see the original on their second date.

It was five years in production, as Falter used all of his printing know-



● An illustration in the Barcelona Haggadah of a family sitting down to the Passover seder. Courtesy of the British Library.

ledge — he comes from a family of printers, and studied at the London College of Printing before temporarily digressing into micro-computer software — to establish the best means of reproduction, to develop paper as close as possible to the original vellum, to ensure the binding equalled the magnificence of the pages within, as well as commissioning scholars to describe and assess the manuscript in a lavish companion volume.

Facsimile two was a four-year task. That was The Rothschild Miscellany, also commissioned around 1470, but in Italy rather than Spain. It combines more than 70 religious and secular works, including the Passover Haggadah and Siddur, and is described in the Facsimile Editions' brochure as "the most lavish Hebrew illuminated manuscript in existence".

Again, Michael Falter persuaded its owner — the Israel Museum in Jerusalem — to allow it to be photographed, the first stage in reproduction that uses computer-controlled laser scanners for the colour separations yet relies on ages-old craftsmanship to lay gold leaf to the same raised effect as in the original.

The Barcelona Haggadah rolled

off the presses after a mere two years, as the Falters consolidated their skills. It is, also, a smaller volume — 322 pages rather than 900-plus of its predecessors — though just as magnificent. Telling the tale of the Children of Israel's flight from Egypt, it was produced in the middle of the 14th century, but by whom and for whom is unknown, and gained its "Barcelona" title from an apparent representation of the arms of the city in one of its illustrations.

The detective story of the manuscript's travels from Spain to Bloomsbury is told in the companion volume by Diana Rowland-Smith, of the British Library's Oriental department.

Inscriptions reveal that it was sold in Bologna in 1459 for "50 broad gold ducats", a sum equivalent here at the period to the annual income of a skilled workman or the price of three good-quality horses. Bologna, Dr Rowland-Smith notes, "was then a major centre of Jewish banking and commerce", where a good price would be paid for such a manuscript.

At the end of the 16th century, an Italian censor in the Reggio Emilia region — a haven for Jews banished from Bologna — signed the volume,

and some decades later it was owned by a respected Jewish teacher in the same area. Its travels continued, to Livorno and Vienna at the end of the 18th century and beginning of the 19th, and then on to Britain.

In October 1843, London book dealers Payne and Foss offered it to the British Museum for £52 10s, "which was a considerable sum at that time for a single manuscript", and it was purchased for the nation the following month, in a package of 75 manuscripts whose total price was reduced from just over £1,300 to £840.

With the establishment of the separate British Library in 1973, the Barcelona Haggadah became part of

its collection, "one of its most significant illuminated manuscripts because of its vivid illustrations of the life of Jews in 14th century Spain, providing an important source for illustrations of musicians and the musical instruments of the medieval period", concludes Dr Rowland-Smith.

The most recent of all Facsimile Editions' efforts has, however, a history which is rather more political than practical.

The spirit of reconciliation

The massive, magnificent Alba Bible was commissioned in 1422 as an attempt to counteract intense anti-Jewish feeling in Spain. Don Luis de Guzman, the high-ranking churchman who paid for its production, intended the translation to Castilian from Hebrew, with its accompanying commentary, to aid Christians to understand Jewish attitudes. But 70 years later, Spain expelled the Jews.

Five hundred years on, there has been a new commission, in a similar spirit of reconciliation, by Spanish industrialist Mauricio Hatchwell Toledano, the moving force behind the International Jewish Committee for Sepharad '92. He asked the Falters to reproduce the Alba Bible — and on March 31, as King Juan Carlos publicly retracted the expulsion order, he and Israel's President, Chaim Herzog, were presented with copies of the facsimile.

Each of the Facsimile Editions' productions is limited to a maximum of 550 copies. Approximate prices are: Barcelona Haggadah, £2,260; Kennicott Bible, £3,950; Rothschild Miscellany, £4,120; Alba Bible, £15,300. For more details, contact Facsimile Editions, 40 Hamilton Terrace, NW8 9UJ (071-286 0071).



● The picture on the right hand page shows the Children of Israel as slaves in Egypt.



● A page from the Kennicott Bible, featuring Jonah's encounter with a whale.