

MOSES IBN ZABARAH dipped his stylus in the rich brown ink and was about to apply it to a folio of thin, crisp parchment almost completely filled with clear, square Hispano-Jewish script. But he did not touch it. He preferred to linger and muse.

This would be the concluding paragraph of his colophon to the Book of Books he had copied from beginning to end during the last 10 months. He looked with satisfaction at the pile of similar folios stacked on the desk. A total of 460 sheets, one more beautiful than the other. And now he was about to complete the last one, the 461st.

He let his mind wander further into the past. Yes, he had come a long way since those days when he started out as an obscure travelling scribe, going from one Jewish community to another throughout Spain in search of a patron who would commission him to copy some manuscript or other.

He also had a great dream: to create his own manuscript – a true, vocalized copy of the traditionally accurate Bible that would be of incomparable beauty in script and illumination. Even more beautiful than the famous manuscript written in Cerbera in the year 1300 CE.

And now the dream was fulfilled: he, Moses Ibn Zabarah, and the artist Joseph Ibn Hayyim, had written and illuminated a book which could compete with the manuscript of Samuel ben Abraham Ibn Nathan and Joseph the Frenchman of Cerbera. Compete, and perhaps surpass.

He knew, however, that the dream could not have been fulfilled but for his young, rich and ambitious patron, Yitzhak Ibn Don Solomon di Braga di la Coruña. Yitzhak had seen the Cervera Bible. His late father's library contained many precious manuscripts, but he had never seen one equal to this in splendour. A passionate lover of books, he ached to acquire it. But the owner would not part with it at any price. And so he made a decision: he would create his own manuscript, and it would be even more beautiful, more richly decorated.

Thus it was that Moses Ibn Zabarah now sat, stylus poised, ready to pen the dedication of his completed work to his patron:

"The admirable youth, Yitzhak son of the late honourable and beloved Don Solomon di Braga di la Coruña. The blessed Lord grant that he study it, he and his children and his children's children throughout the generations... and God enable him to produce many books, books without end."

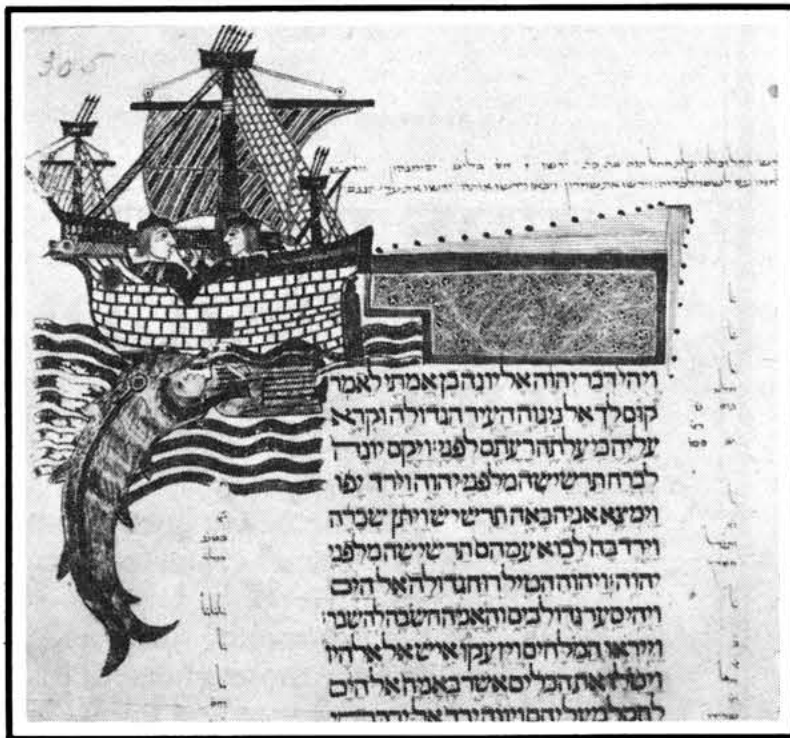
Obviously Moses Ibn Zabarah looked forward to obtaining more commissions from his patron, especially as it seems that he had previous connections with the Braga family, and it may well be that it was he who influenced Yitzhak's decision. Joseph Ibn Hayyim was engaged to illustrate and illuminate the manuscript, and the work began.

Judging by the magnitude of the project, it is safe to suppose that Joseph Ibn Hayyim was a well-known artist, and that he was well acquainted with the Cervera Bible, whose influence can be seen in many of his illustrations. What is certain is that he was a great artist in his own right, inspired by his own imagination both in style and motifs.

The two men worked in close cooperation, the scribe planning the layout and allotting the spaces for illumination, as was customary in the production of medieval manuscripts. Now the work was complete.

The scribe dipped his stylus in the ink once more and wrote his closing

Ibn Zabarah's blessing



Michael and Linda Falter.

Emmanuel Pratt

words: "Blessed be he who preserves this book in his treasury. It should be kept for the children of Israel for generations... Amen."

The date of the conclusion of the work was subtly coded by accentuating certain letters in the text of the last paragraph of the colophon. They added up to read: the third day of the month of Av in the year 5236 from the Creation. In terms of the Gregorian calendar, this meant July 24, 1476.

The sky was dark. Through the open windows the scribe heard monotonous chanting approaching. A procession of white-robed Dominican friars, torches in hand, passed along the narrow street below. The chanting died away, and soon a glow appeared in the sky. In the central square of Coruña a great bonfire had been lit. In it books were being burned. The Spanish Inquisition was on the march.

THE FATE OF Yitzhak Ibn Don Solomon's library, as of the young man himself, is unknown. But the beautiful manuscript escaped the flames, to lie hidden, no one knows where, for nearly three centuries.

On April 5, 1771, a certain Patrick Chalmers walked into the Radcliffe Trustees Collection in Oxford with the manuscript in his hand. He was offering it for sale, and on the advice of the librarian, Dr. Benjamin Kennicott, the Radcliffe decided to purchase it. Patrick Chalmers, Esquire, returned to obscurity richer by 52 pounds, 10 shillings.

Kennicott well knew what he was buying. A canon of Christ Church Cathedral and a learned Hebraist, he had studied hundreds of Hebrew biblical manuscripts from all over Europe, comparing their textual

variations. His young wife, Hannah More, studied Hebrew to assist him in his ambitious research to ascertain "the accurate Hebrew text of the Bible."

The Ibn Zabarah manuscript was never part of Kennicott's personal collection. However, when it was transferred to Oxford University's great Bodleian Library in 1872, it was registered as "Kennicott One."

ANOTHER 108 years passed in twilight, with only the privileged experts having access to the exquisite manuscript. Until early in 1980, a young London printing engineer, Michael Falter, spent a leisurely Sunday afternoon visiting a permanent display of ancient Hebrew manuscripts in the British Library.

Michael Falter has a long family printing tradition "It goes back to the time when my great-grandfather was a travelling salesman in Czechoslovakia going on his bicycle from one town to another, selling type to printers," he told me. His grandfather had a printer's shop in Prague, and his father, a printing engineer, moved first to Vienna, and then, as a refugee, to London, where he started a printing machinery business.

Michael has a fascination for antique printing presses. He acquired two more than a hundred years old, planning to use them to reproduce printed works in the same way as they were originally produced. Some years ago he went to see Dr. David Patterson, chief librarian of the Bodleian's Oriental collection, but the plan did not materialize. Now, in the British Library, the idea returned, and he paid another visit to Dr. Patterson, who invited him and his fiancée, Linda, to look at the "Kennicott."

They were stunned by its splendour. And yet there was something else – a challenge and a cry from the distant past: "Blessed be he who preserves this book in his treasury. It should be kept for the children of Israel for generations... Amen."

That was an injunction that had never been fulfilled. He, Michael Falter, would fulfil it. He would make it possible for Jews all over the world to admire and study it. He would produce an exact facsimile of the Kennicott Bible.

"It is difficult to describe the extraordinary feeling we had at that moment," says Michael. "We de-

cidated there and then that this was the manuscript we wanted to make a facsimile of. No other. This would be our first. Kennicott One would be Falter's One."

And Falter's One would be produced in 550 copies.

THE FIRST thing was to secure a contract from Oxford University. It was a two-year battle. "We had no previous works to show them," says Linda, "and we didn't even know then that the library itself was bidding for the same project."

Why was the Bodleian interested in making a facsimile of one of its most treasured gems? Would it not lower the value of the original?

"The original has no price, so it cannot be diminished," she replies. "But every time somebody uses the manuscript it deteriorates in some way: there is wear on the binding, there is wear on the pages. And if no facsimile is made, it will eventually disappear. It will fall apart and they will have to lock it away and nobody will see it. And without blowing our own trumpet, we are actually performing a very valuable function for the library by producing this facsimile for them."

When the Bodleian finally had to admit that they were abandoning the project because it was impossible to produce an exact replica of the original, Michael and Linda were given the contract.

NOW THEY were on their own to cope with problems that seemed insurmountable. The first was the paper:

"As far as we have seen," says Linda, "facsimiles normally don't give the feel of the original manuscript because of the quality of the paper. We wanted to produce a work that would have not only the look but the feel of the original, and so we had special paper milled for us. It had to have the translucency of parchment, so that the text and the illumination on the other side of the leaf would show through just slightly. It must not be smooth, and it must not be rough. Our facsimile was to be printed on a miracle. And it was."

Most of their battles the couple had to fight on the Continent. "We went all over Europe looking for printers and paper," says Michael. "For about a fortnight non-stop we were seeing two printers a day."

No sooner was one problem solved than another emerged. The major one was the box binding. The original Kennicott One manuscript, in spite of its five centuries of wandering, is still in very good condition. This it owes to the magnificent box-binding in which it is enclosed: the soft goatskin is stretched over wooden boards which protect it from all sides.

"We have excellent binders in England," says Linda, "and assumed that we could get very good craft binding at home. It took us six months to discover that the best binder in England could not produce work anywhere near good enough. We went as far as Milan to find one. It was our own printer, in fact, who introduced us to him."

The Italian printer proved to be just as much of an enthusiast for the project as he is a perfectionist.

"We could not have found a better man," says Michael. "The paper we were so proud of was his greatest problem, but he overcomes it heroically. Take the illumination, for example. There are 238 pages, illuminated in 11 colours. Most of them have a lot of gold. In 550 copies you have a total of 12,090 pages."

"After having tried all sorts of printing short-cuts we came to the conclusion that the only way to apply gold

so that it would feel like the original was the way it was applied to the original – by hand. And that's what we are doing."

THE FALTERS were not satisfied with producing just the facsimile of Kennicott One. Attached to it, in a separate twin volume, will be a fully-illustrated scholarly introduction by Prof. Bezalel Narkiss and Dr. A. Cohen-Mushlin of the Hebrew University.

To quote from this introduction, which deals with the historical and the craftsmanship significance of the original manuscript:

"It is a labour of love in which three people were involved: the scribe, the artist, and the patron, who all contributed their share, whether in inspiration or skill... All three are mentioned in the manuscript, and it is our first task to disentangle the motivation, inspiration, and roles of these three men in the making of the Kennicott Bible."

A journalist may add another two people whose motivation and inspiration in creating the facsimile would take as much effort to disentangle.

The couple are very modest in speaking of their creation, but there is a justifiable note of pride in their voices when they talk of their determination to achieve perfection down to the last detail:

"The two volumes will be sumptuously enclosed in a presentation portfolio box which will itself be protected by a specially designed shipping container. And each copy will be delivered personally by a messenger."

When the printing of the 550 copies is completed, the plates will be destroyed in the presence of Bodleian librarians.

What was their investment in the project?

Michael and Linda look at each other and chuckle. Each adds an ingredient of their investment: Blood. Sweat. Years of unsalaried work for two people – and now a baby. Using up all our savings and borrowing more money. We have nothing left in the bank except one very big overdraft...

They chuckle again, obviously enjoying their little Odyssey.

At the beginning of 1984, when sample pages and two dummy copies were ready, Michael and Linda "split forces." Michael went to the U.S. while Linda came to Israel on a sales trip. The first signs of success appeared immediately. Feedback came from all over the world: New York, London, the Israel National Library, Bar-Ilan University, Tel Aviv Museum, Tel Aviv University, Toronto, Sydney, and even the Imperial Palace, Tokyo.

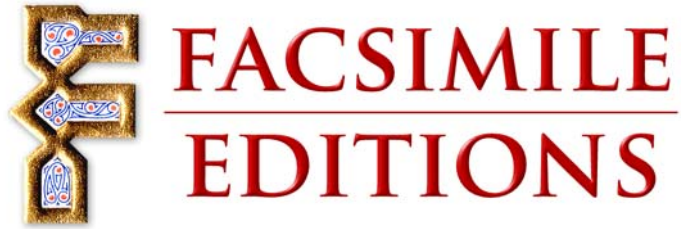
"We are very happy the way things are going," says Michael.

There are even more significant signs of a major breakthrough: Oxford and other major libraries all over the world are offering their most precious manuscripts for facsimile.

"We are considering one ancient Hebrew manuscript. You'll have to excuse me if I do not disclose which one," smiles Michael.

The presses in Milan keep rolling. The first books are just being completed. One copy will be in Jerusalem in time for the Jerusalem Book Fair. Behind all the excitement one discerns the fulfilment through the blessing of Moses Ibn Zabarah: "And God enable him to produce many books, books without end."

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