

MEDIEVAL HISTORY

MAGAZINE

Issue 11

July 2004

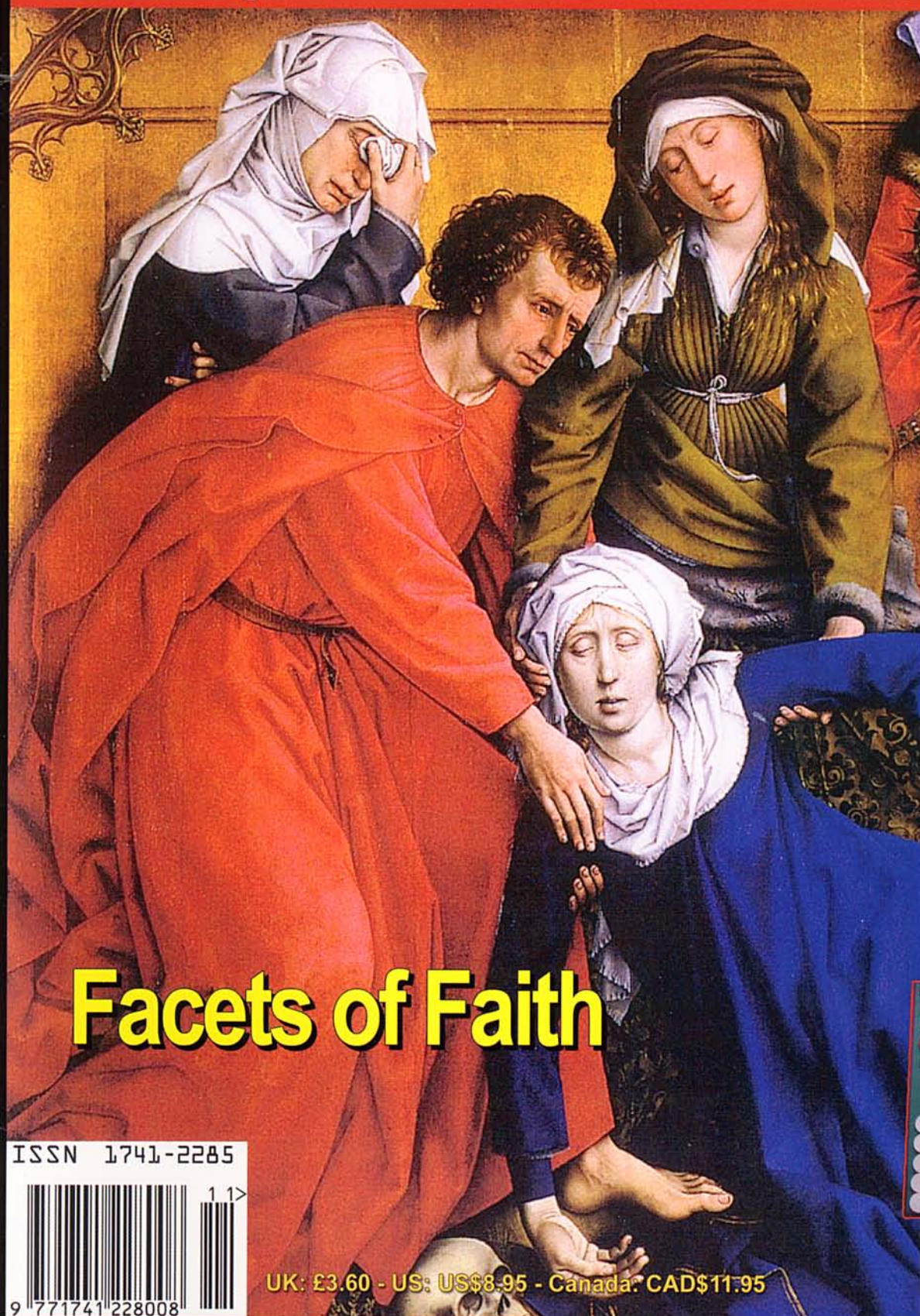
£ 3.60

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ISSN 1741-2285



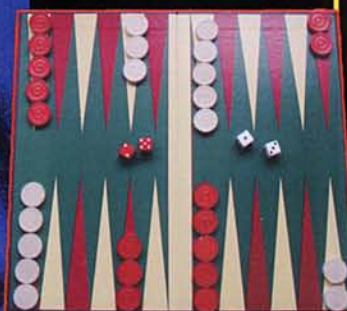
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reviews

North French Hebrew Miscellany



Limited edition 360
Published by Facsimile Editions Ltd
1,494 folios numbered 0-746
US\$ 8,995.00
ISBN 0 948223 219

This little treasure, only 16½ x 12½ cm (6½" x 5½") is a magnificent medieval volume, the most important Hebrew manuscript exhibited by the British Library. A facsimile edition has been produced to the highest possible standards by world leaders in this field Facsimile Editions, London.

The background to The North French Miscellany

The Miscellany contains all that is important to a Jew, the Pentateuch and Haftarat (readings from the Prophets), the Song of Songs, together with biblical texts and prayers such as those for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

It also provides guidance on rituals regarding Tefillin, *** [phylacteries - consists of two leather boxes, containing four passages of the Torah, used by Jewish men at prayer] ritual slaughter, the Mezuzah, ***[parchment with two passages from Deuteronomy written on it, fixed to doorpost of a Jewish house]

Jewish law concerning marriage,

divorce and even business partnerships! The volume also contains the Hebrew version of the Book of Tobit, an extremely rare text in medieval manuscripts.

The manuscript originated in northeast France, in the region of Picardy-Artois between 1278 and 1280. Philip III was king of France, having succeeded his father, Louis IX (Saint Louis), in 1270. Louis IX had imposed severe restrictions on Jews in 1219 forcing them to wear the Jewish badge, the *rouelle*. Philip imposed additional restrictions in 1277 forcing Jews to wear the horned, or 'Jew's' Hat, in addition to the *rouelle*. This pictorial evidence dates the manuscript between 1278 and 1280. This date is further confirmed by the inclusion of the earliest known copy of Isaac de Corbeil's *Sefer Mitsvot Katan*, a legal code composed in or around 1277.

The manuscript probably left France during a period of increasing Jewish persecution in 1306 reaching Mestre in Italy by 1479 and eventually arriving in Venice. No one knows exactly what happened to the manuscript after that. Catherine de Medici, Louis XIV, Cardinal Richelieu and Henry IV were all enthusiastic collectors of Hebrew manuscripts and perhaps the manuscript was owned by one of these.

The Scribe and the Artwork

Some researchers believe that Benjamin the Scribe, see Folio 306 verso was the sole copyist creating the manuscript for his own use. If this is correct then Benjamin must have been extremely wealthy, since the finest artists were employed and no expense spared. It seems inconceivable that a single scribe could afford to create something so luxurious. Many Jews of the time manufactured silk, sold cloth or



Folio 306



Folio 354

a look at some of the latest books, music, games and multimedia relating to the Medieval Period.

manufactured wine from their own vineyards so perhaps Benjamin was a wealthy merchant. It is interesting that Benjamin, having indicated in his colophon that he was the sole scribe, gives no insight as to whom the patron, if there was one, could



Folio 522

have been.

The volume contains 49 full page miniatures depicting biblical scenes. It provides pictorial evidence of social conditions and is ultimately a very fine piece of artwork. Almost all of its 1,494 folios are illustrated with grotesques, flowers, arabesques, animals, fishes and birds in the High Gothic style. The Miscellany bears witness to the extremely high standards achieved by the creators of Ashkenazi Hebrew manuscripts at this time.

Folio 354v demonstrates the unity between the written word and magnificent artwork. The page is divided into three columns. One column is enclosed in a lavishly decorated box surrounded by angels, winged animals and grotesques. Within the boxed column the important words are enlarged to double line height and heavily underlined with gilded embossments. In the third column the gilded heading emerges from the mouth of a fictitious animal.

Folio 522r, the Tabernacle

implements, is presented within a gold medallion. The Ark of the Covenant is flanked by two cherubim. At the bottom of the illustration is the Table of Shewbread. To the right is the jar of manna. This is a very rare depiction of the Tabernacle implements and so far as is known does not appear anywhere else in Ashkenazi manuscripts. It comes from the tradition of Spanish bibles.

A sense of humour is visible throughout the manuscript. On Folio 355r marginal decorations serve not only to emphasise the important words, but also to display the artist's mischievous sense of fun. In the top right-hand corner there is a strange creature with a human face wearing a pointed hat, a reference to the restrictions on Jews at that time.

The Production of the Facsimile

The extraordinary frailty of the original made its reproduction a very delicate operation. Using extreme caution the manuscript was prepared by experts at the British Library. Every page was photographed and great care taken to ensure exact colour matching between the original and



Folio 355



Folio 355r

the facsimile.

The facsimile is printed on uncoated, neutral pH vegetable parchment, specially manufactured to be as close as possible in weight and thickness to the original skins.

The raised burnished gold leaf of the original has been faithfully reproduced. Gold and silver metal leaf was applied layer by layer and then each folio was cut to match the original and aged where necessary. Where Benjamin's prickings have survived these have been reproduced together with natural holes present in the skins on their original purchase.

The facsimile is accompanied by a companion volume containing articles commissioned from the world's leading experts. These provide in-depth explanations of all 84 groups of texts plus facts relating to the manuscript's original creation. This is the most thorough study of the Miscellany undertaken to date.

Only 360 copies of the facsimile and its companion have been produced and the photographic plates have now been destroyed to guarantee the fidelity of the facsimile.

Frances Spiegel B.A. (Hons.) Dip. Eur. Hum

Photographs courtesy of www.facsimile-editions.com (c) The British Library
Full details of the facsimile edition may be found at www.facsimile-editions.com



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