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Adding new gold to the Rothschild Miscellany

By HELEN DAVIS
Special to the Exponent

JERUSALEM — Five hundred years ago, at the height of the Renaissance, a wealthy Italian Jew, Moses ben Yekutiel Hacohen, gathered around him some of Italy's finest scribes, artists and craftsmen.

His intention was to create the most elegant, lavishly illustrated Hebrew manuscript of the era — a work to rival the sumptuous manuscripts being commissioned by the Roman Catholic aristocracy of Italy.

The result was a masterpiece, an exquisite miscellany of Jewish religious and secular life. The book includes the daily and festival prayers, the books of Psalms, Job and Proverbs, the Passover Haggadah, Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers), fables, moralistic stories and treatises.

No one knows what became of Moses Hacohen, but his magnificent miscellany, which was probably written around 1470, survived him.

From 1832 to 1855, the manuscript was in the Solomon de Parente collection in Trieste, Italy. Later, it was sold to the Rothschild family in Paris, where it remained until it was looted during the Nazi occupation.

The manuscript — now known as the Rothschild Miscellany — reappeared in New York after the war when an attempt was made to sell it to Alexander Marx, librarian of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Marx instantly recognized the manuscript as one of the treasures of the Rothschild collection and had it restored to the family in London.

In 1957, James de Rothschild sent the miscellany to Israel, as a gift to Jerusalem, and the original is now in the Israel Museum.

Enter — half a millennium after Moses ben Yekutiel Hacohen — Michael and Linda Falter, a young Jewish couple from London with a passion for ancient, illuminated manuscripts.

The Falters had fallen in love with the Rothschild Miscellany and they determined to produce a facsimile edition that would be as faithful to the priceless original as possible, using the finest human skills and the most advanced technology available.

Moreover, the Israel Museum was delighted to cooperate for the enthusiastic Falters had already won themselves a remarkable reputation within the rarified world of collectors, scholars and custodians

of ancient, illuminated manuscripts.

In June 1985, after five years of painstaking research, they had produced a magnificent facsimile edition of the famous Kennicott Hebrew Bible, which was written and illustrated in La Coruna, Spain, in 1476, shortly before the Inquisition and expulsion of Spanish Jewry.

The Kennicott Bible — so named after Benjamin Kennicott, an English Christian Hebraist — is one of the jewels of the famous Bodleian Library in Oxford, England.

The 500-year-old original manuscript is so frail, and of such immense value, that only 20 art historians and scholars over the past 200 years have been allowed to even study it.

Michael and Linda Falter saw the Kennicott Bible just once, by special arrangement, and immediately decided to create a facsimile edition.

"We didn't actually decide to create a facsimile," said Linda Falter. "The Bible decided for us. It was something beautiful that took you away from the nastiness of every day; a lovely thing to be involved in."

"But the challenge of reproducing it without the skills that were available to the creators of the original was formidable."

Equally formidable was the task of convincing the Bodleian Library and the Board of Oxford University to give the untried Falters a contract to produce the facsimile — and permission to photograph the bible's 922 pages through optical white glass that was manufactured specially for the project.

Through sheer perseverance and abundant energy, the couple succeeded. It took them a year to find an Italian paper manufacturer who, after much trial, error and expensive research, could mill for them a special paper with a thickness, translucence and "feel" almost identical to the original calfskin vellum.

Then came the search for a printer capable of handling the extraordinarily difficult task of reproducing precisely the Hebrew text and the 11-color illustrations.

Michael Falter, 39, is himself a third-generation printer. He knew the difficulties involved and he scoured Europe for months until he finally found a craftsman in Milan whose work "was astounding."

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A page from the Rothschild Miscellany attests to Michael and Linda faithful and detailed renderings of original illuminated manuscripts.

MANUSCRIPT

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But even the gifted Italian craftsman could not find a shortcut to applying gold leaf to 12,090 pages of manuscript.

"We finally came to the conclusion," says Michael Falter, "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 just what we did."

The final problem to overcome was to reproduce the opulent, six-sided, box-binding that had sustained the original Kennicott Bible, keeping it virtually airtight for 500 years.

Britain's top binderies tried, and failed, to reproduce the original to the Falter's exacting standards: "We got to the point," says Linda Falter, "where we nearly gave up."

They were financing all the trials and research themselves, costs were exorbitant, and the results disappointing.

Once again, it was an Italian who came to the rescue. He produced, just from a photograph, a binding of Moroccan goatskin stretched over wooden boards, embossed with handcut brass dies and faithful to the original in every detail.

When the Kennicott facsimile was finally produced, the limited edition of 550 copies became an instant collectors' item. The price of the work reflected the superb craftsmanship and beauty of the product.

Before it was actually published, collectors could order the facsimile for a price of \$2,900. By the time of publication, it had risen to \$3,900, and today, with but a few remaining on the market, economic forces have pushed up the price to around \$5,500.

The Kennicott Bibles have become prized additions to private collections throughout the world — the Japanese Royal Family bought 10 —

and have been purchased by major universities in Britain, Europe, the United States and Australia.

According to Dr. Martin Brett, a medieval historian at Cambridge University, the superbly produced facsimiles give scholars and the general public access to ancient, priceless works, allowing them to "adore without destroying."

"Some of these priceless works simply fall apart in your hands," he says. "You feel their bindings crack — it's a very uneasy feeling.

"Expertly produced facsimiles solve that problem. Scholars won't have to keep referring to the original."

Having proved their ability to faithfully reproduce exquisite manuscripts, the Falters are now faced with an embarrassment of riches. Museums and libraries all over the world are offering their most precious manuscripts for facsimile.

The Rothschild Miscellany, however, was a natural choice for their next venture. An astounding 816 of its 948 pages are richly illuminated and decorated with burnished, flat and powdered gold and silver.

While the Falters and their Italian craftsmen have mastered the basic techniques of facsimile production, the Rothschild Miscellany, which will be published in June, has demanded a great deal of additional research and technical development.

The Falters moved to Milan with their two infant sons to supervise every stage of production, which includes the meticulous checking of each page against the original manuscript in Jerusalem.

They are confident that the finished product — with a pre-publication price of \$4,900, rising to some \$6,300 after publication — will reflect the same devotion to perfection that was poured into its creation 500 years ago.

Moses ben Yekutiel Hacohen would surely have approved. ■



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