

Rabbi Moses Arragel's Testament

THE ALBA BIBLE



THE ALBA BIBLE

In 1992 His Majesty King Juan Carlos will publicly retract the order of expulsion of the Jews from Spain in a sincere bid to undo the evil committed by the Inquisition centuries ago. This extraordinary and unprecedented turn of fate will be commemorated by the publication of a magnificent facsimile edition of a unique manuscript.

The ALBA BIBLE is not merely a superb example of Spanish manuscript illumination. It is all that remains of one of the last attempts to heal the rifts between Jews and Christians that finally led to the calamity of expulsion. The facsimile will be published as a tribute to and celebration of the reconciliation, and renewal of understanding taking place in our own time.

In 1422 against a backdrop of intense, anti-Jewish feeling in Spain, Don Luis de Guzmán, Grand Master of Calatrava, arrived at a decision that only by commissioning a Castilian Bible, translated directly from the Hebrew, accompanied by a commentary reflecting the Jewish understanding of the texts, would Christians comprehend the differences between Christian and Jewish attitudes, and come to tolerate each others views. The decision was itself remarkable, since Don Luis, as a high-ranking Churchman, wielded immense power in Castile. He discovered that Rabbi Moses Arragel, of Maqueda in Castile, was capable of such a task, and commanded him to produce the work in return for a generous remuneration. The Rabbi had good reason to be reluctant – by exposing the Jewish view he feared he might fuel antagonism towards Jews, and himself in particular. He firmly refused, pointing out a Jewish prohibition against illustrated Bible manuscripts, and sparking off a lively correspondence with the Grand Master. This has luckily survived.

A team of Christian artists was employed to illustrate the text. What emerged is no less than a masterpiece. Known as the ALBA BIBLE, after its eventual owner, it is the most important manuscript to have survived from the reign of King John II.

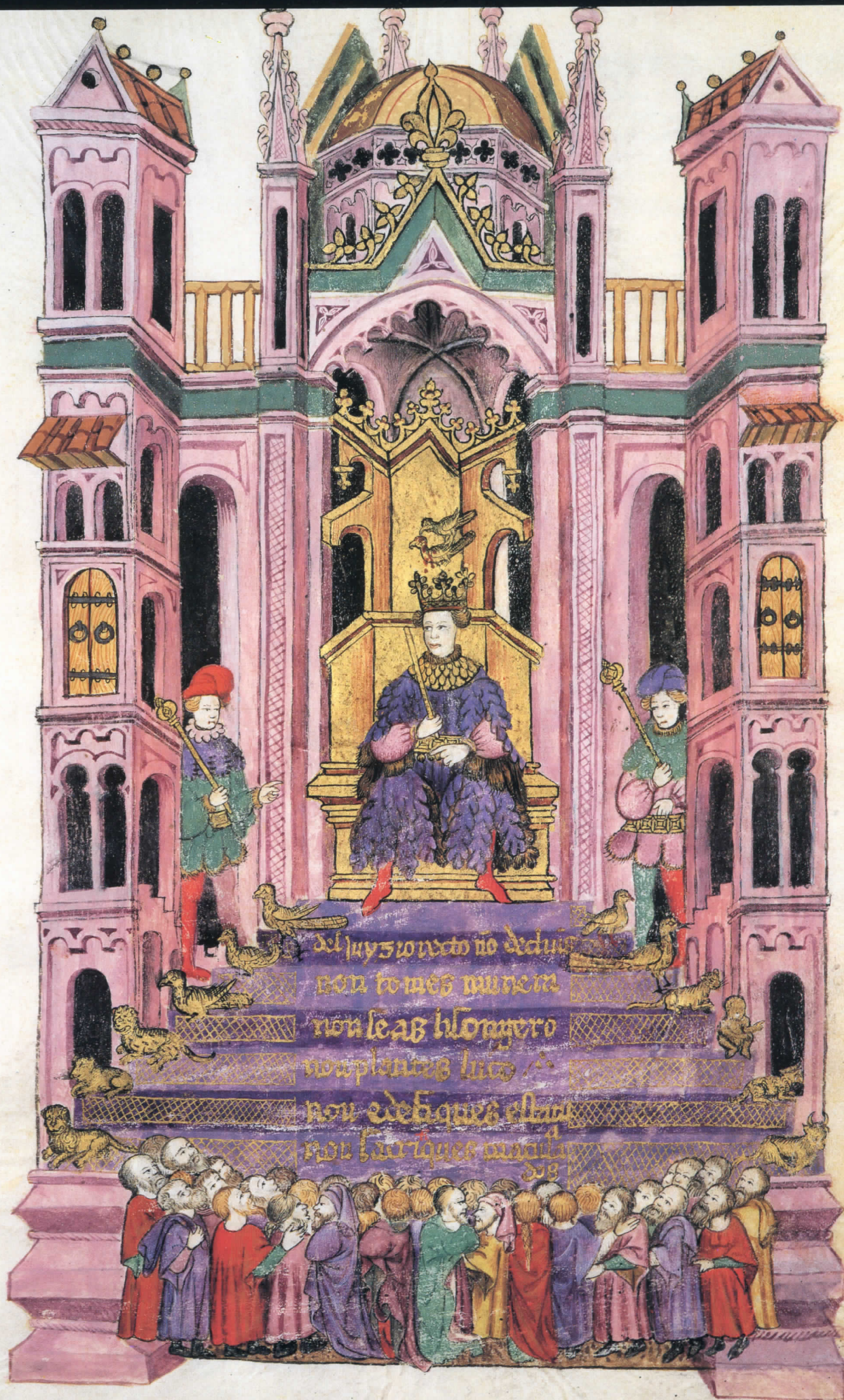


The ALBA BIBLE, with its 515 folios and 334 miniatures, is a powerful work of visual art. But still more significant is the vast commentary it contains. Rabbi Moses showed great independence and courage, and his translation and commentary make few concessions to Christian thinking. It is rich in extracts not only from rabbinical writings such as the *Targumim*, *Midrashim* and *Talmud*, but also from later works such as the *Zohar*. Rabbi Moses gave the artists detailed instructions on the illustrations, furnishing them with specifically Jewish interpretations of biblical scenes.

It is remarkable that the Jewish view is the one that is regularly portrayed: no other extant manuscript contains so many rabbinically inspired miniatures: Cain kills Abel by biting his neck like a serpent, exactly as is described in the *Zohar*, for instance. We know that Rabbi Moses Arragel finished the manuscript on Friday 2 June 1430 in Maqueda, but a long time afterwards he had still not been paid for his work. All sight of him is then lost. Most of the Jews of Maqueda converted to Christianity at the end of the fifteenth century, but the name Arragel does not appear among those who were baptized. The ALBA BIBLE seems to be his only monument.

After the manuscript left his hands, it was scrutinized by Franciscan censors in Toledo until 1433. From there it was passed to the University of Salamanca and it was finally submitted to a detailed examination at the Franciscan monastery in Toledo. This culminated in a public disputation at which theologians, knights, Jews and Moors argued their views. Following this, the manuscript disappeared until 1622 and it is now housed in the great library of the Liria Palace, seat of the Grand Duke of Alba and Berwick.

Spanish Jewry had great powers of recovery. This unique work shows how, despite the prevailing negative attitudes to the Jews and the looming problem of the conversos, enlightened personal initiatives could still carry great weight in Jewish-Christian relations.



del luy s'io recto no deduis
non tomes munera
non se as h'longero
non plantes luto
non edefiques estatu
non faciques curula

208

BACKGROUND

Jewish culture penetrated so deeply into Spanish life that it is quite widely apparent even 500 years after the Expulsion. Jewish works, such as Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed*, were translated from Arabic into Hebrew and then Latin, enabling them to have an impact on Christian scholars. Rabbis such as Nachmanides and David Kimchi embellished Spain with their wisdom and understanding, engendering a love of books not only for their contents but also for their physical beauty.

THE FACSIMILE

The publishers of the facsimile edition of the ALBA BIBLE received the following commission from its new patron: "I want the most beautiful facsimile ever produced, no more, no less...". Señor Mauricio Hatchwell Toledano, who persuaded the Duke of Alba to allow a facsimile to be made of his masterpiece, is the moving force behind the International Jewish Committee for Sepharad '92. He decided that the ALBA BIBLE would be a living testament to the spirit of 1992, reviving and fulfilling the long-forgotten hopes of those who had laboured over it five centuries before.

Unrelenting in his quest for the finest quality, Sr. Hatchwell commissioned Michael and Linda Falter, partners in the publishing company Facsimile Editions, to produce the facsimile to hitherto unsurpassed standards, combining the finest materials and the very best of craftsmanship.

Its paper, especially milled in Italy, has the exact feel and opacity of the original parchment. The pages of the manuscript were disbound at the Palace in Madrid by a binding expert from Oxford, enabling each folio to be laid flat for photography. The leading photographer in this field, David Harris from Israel, took special equipment from London to Madrid in order to photograph the manuscript.



Over the coming year, colour separators from Milan will join Linda Falter to compare proofs with the original until the best colour-match has been achieved. Every gold dot will be examined by the Italian gilders, and even the prickings made by the scribe will be reproduced. The facsimile will be bound in a Mudéjar style morocco binding. Michael and Linda Falter will live in Milan for the entire period of the production, where their team of craftsmen will work under their constant supervision.

The facsimile will be no mere object of beauty, for those who made the manuscript were primarily mindful of the words and message it contains. Aware of this, Señor Hatchwell set in motion the commissioning of leading scholars to provide detailed explanations and analyses of the manuscript in a companion volume. Jeremy Schonfield, an editor specializing in medieval manuscripts and Jewish culture, will co-ordinate the work of this team of specialists.

Only 500 copies of the facsimile and its companion volume will be made. It is our firm belief that by making this medieval masterpiece available to a wider public, we will be fulfilling the desire of its makers, and bringing to fruition – albeit five centuries later than anyone would have wished – the atmosphere of tolerance and understanding for which they laboured, and for which they – and many subsequent generations – have prayed in vain.

International Jewish Committee
Sepharad '92

515 Park Avenue, 6th Floor
New York, NY 10022
U.S.A.

Telephone: (212) 836 1827
Facsimile: (212) 836 1873

P.º de la Castellana, 93-3.º

Edificio Cadagua
28046 Madrid
SPAIN

Telephone: +34 (1) 556 31 64
Facsimile: +34 (1) 555 75 75

FACSIMILE EDITIONS PUBLISHERS
LONDON

FACSIMILE EDITIONS
40 Hamilton Terrace
London NW8 9UJ
ENGLAND

Telephone: +44 (71) 286 0071
Facsimile: +44 (71) 266 3927