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Fragment of the Month: January 2023

Exploring European Writers's Black In Jewish Culture (T-S 20.180)

Alex Compagnon

Alex Compagnon is a member of the Cambridge Genizah Research Unit (which is its website and deserves the transcription) Fragments in the Taylor-Schechter collection. Dual Scholarship Lecturer at Jesus College, Cambridge, he is also working on a PhD, supervised by Professor Stephen Morgan, on the Hebrew Bible in Early Modern Europe, with a focus on the Hebrew Bible in Spanish Protestant Bibles. He is also interested in the Hebrew Bible in Spanish and other languages of translation (Judeo-Spanish, Ladino, Castilian, Catalan, Aragonese, Galician, Portuguese, Basque, Occitan, Provençal, Gascon, Arpitan, Sardinian, Corsican, Italian, Sicilian, Neapolitan, Venetian, Friulian, Romanian, Dalmatian, Istriotian, Istro-Romanian, Aromanian, Meglenoromanian, Ladin, Romansh, Sursilvan, Vallader, Sutsilvan, Surmiran, Puschlavin, Jauer, Vlach, Gallo, Walloon, Picard, Norman, Jèrriais, Guernésiais, Chtimi, Lorrain, Franc-Comtois, Bourguignon, Poitevin-Saintongeais, Angevin, Berrichon, Bourbonnais, Lyonnais, Forez, Auvergnat, Vivaro-Alpenc, Dauphinois, Valaisan, Savoyard, Romand

It is this comparison to the *Biblia Pauperum* samples that stands out to me. Like T-S 20.188, 'Poor Man's Bibles' are mainly block books. Each leaf is printed on only one side and displays clearly demarcated biblical scenes with woodcut captions. The partial painting in some of them is also consistent with the colouring that T-S 20.188 once had.

These similarities lead me to identify T-S 20.188 as a Jewish 'Poor Man's Bible' and place its creator in northern Europe during the late fifteenth century. Whether that creator was a Christian or Jew remains unclear. There is certainly Hebrew text, but due to legal restrictions against Jewish printing, most European Hebrew printers—at least by the sixteenth century—were Christians. T-S 20.188 could well be an early example of the European-Egyptian printed book trade that is so well-attested in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Genizah material.[13]

Fig. 16. Complete image of previous extract from a Biblia Pauperum (Germany or Netherlands, c. 1465)[14]

On the other hand, T-S 20.188 might be something completely different. In it, we have only a single page of a damaged work that was found in an unusual context. That work is still mixed up in the artistic conventions of its place of origin. It is not simple to explain, and I do not have all the knowledge needed to explain it. As I said before, no individuals, not even Genizah specialists, have the expertise to identify all types of fragments. That eclecticism is often the biggest challenge in Genizah research, but it is also what makes the Cairo Genizah so valuable. It is these artifacts that, at first glance, seem removed from their natural environment that allow us to uncover the history of interconnections between seemingly separate communities.

If you have more information about this Fragment of the Month or ideas for an alternative identification, please do not hesitate to get in touch (email: nrp40@cam.ac.uk or Twitter: @NPosegay). I really want to know what it is.[15]

Footnotes

1 On block printing in the Middle East and North Africa, especially in Arabic, see Kristina Richardson, *Roma in the Medieval Islamic World: Literacy, Culture, and Migration* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2022), 111; and Karl Schaefer, *Enigmatic Charms: Medieval Arabic Block Printed Amulets in American and European Libraries and Museums*, vol. 82, Handbook of Ottoman Studies (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

2 See the *Genizah Fragments* blog post on the topic: https://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/genizah-fragments/posts/throwback-thursday-heb....

3 Image downloaded from Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fl-_1_Thesouro_de_Nobreza,_Armas... .

4 Well, except Adam and Eve.

5 'Shebna' is spelled with final ה in the engraving, whereas it is usually spelled with final א. Maybe that's significant.

6 Eva Frojmovic, 'From Naples to Constantinople: The Aesop Workshop's Woodcuts in the Oldest Illustrated Printed Haggadah', *The Library* 18, no. 2 (1996): 91, 105–7.

7 Abel is having a bad day.

8 See John K. Bonnell, 'The Serpent with a Human Head in Art and in Mystery Play', *American Journal of Archaeology* 21, no. 3 (1917): 255–91, which is one of the most 1917 articles I've ever read. See also another Genizah fragment, T-S K10.1, that uses a human-faced serpent as calligraphic flourish: https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-TS-K-00010-00001/1.

9 Image and information from this blog by Michael Faletra: https://michaelfaletra.weebly.com/ebstorf-map.html (accessed January 13 2023). For more on the map's history, see G. Pischke, 'The Ebstorf Map: Tradition and Contents of a Medieval Picture of the World', *History of Geo- and Space Sciences* 5 (2014): 155–61, https://doi.org/10.5194/hgss-5-155-2014 (open access).

10 Image from Richard Fisher, *A Catalogue of a Collection of Engravings Etchings and Woodcuts* (London: John C. Wilkins, 1879), 126 and viii.

11 Image and provenance information from the Princeton University Digitial Library's Scheide Library collection here: https://dpul.princeton.edu/scheide/catalog/ht24wj49c (leaf 1 verso) (accessed 13 January 2023).

12 Image and provenance information from the Cleveland Museum of Art, item 1986.91, found here: https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1986.91 (accessed 13 January 2023).

13 See Nick Posegay, 'Hebrew Printing and Printers' Colophons in the Cairo Genizah: Networking Book Trade in Europe and the Ottoman Empire', in *Literary Snippets: Colophons Across Space and Time*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke and George A. Kiraz (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, n.d.), forthcoming, possibly soon-ish. Email me.

14 Cleveland Museum of Art, item 1986.91, found here: https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1986.91 (accessed 13 January 2023).

15 Thank you to Jesús de Prado Plumed and Liam Sims for their assistance at various stages of this investigation. Any errors are mine alone.

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