Judah Moscato is one of the most widely studied of Renaissance Hebrew preachers, and his sermons have elicited considerable praise as representative of the Italian Jewish Renaissance. To Isaac Barzilay, Judah Moscato came closest to “the ideal of the *omo universale* of Renaissance days,” and his sermons demonstrated the blending of Judaic and classical cultures, of “regaining old boundaries” and bringing “secular” learning back into Judaism.2 For Israel Bettan, Moscato was uniquely “a child of the Renaissance . . . [who] perfected the form, and transfigured the substance of the Jewish sermon . . . [and] raised it to the level of a distinct literary art.” Moscato was the first whose “graceful and artistic” sermons give us a feeling of having been “addressed to a congregation” rather than written as a theological treatise.3 More recently, Marc Saperstein refers to Moscato as “one of the leading lights in that florescence of sixteenth-century Italian Jewish culture which is frequently associated with the Renaissance.”4

And yet, despite the fame of his sermons, we actually know very little about Moscato5 or his preaching career. As Marc Saperstein has...
noted, “fundamental questions about the significance of his homiletical oeuvre are matters of continued debate.” Though his article on “Judah Moscato: A Late Renaissance Jewish Preacher” treats several of the sermons in detail, Moshe Idel focused intentionally on the dynamics of cultural interaction rather than on the homiletics per se. For his part, Joseph Dan treated the style and structure of the sermons, and demonstrated clearly that Moscato was a master preacher. But Dan’s conclusions that a surviving printed sermon closely corresponds to the original oral presentation and that the oral sermon was undoubtedly delivered in Hebrew to a multi-lingual and intellectually sophisticated audience have been challenged and remain to be proven.

Moscato’s sermons present us with a particularly acute example of a general methodological problem: the inevitable gap between the original oral sermon and the surviving written or printed record. In this regard, Jewish sermons are especially inaccessible since they were usually delivered on Sabbaths and Holy Days when the audience was religiously prohibited from taking notes and, consequently, we have almost no auditors’ summaries as we do, for example, with sermons given by Protestant Christian divines. In general, historians have tended to ignore the circumstances of the original delivery, granting primacy to the surviving text and focusing their analysis either on the formal structure of the published presentation or on its intellectual

---


8 “The Sermon Tefillah ve-Dim’ah of R. Judah Moscato,” (Hebrew), Sinai 76 (1975): 209–232; idem, “Homiletic Literature and its Literary Values” (Hebrew), Ha-Sifrut 3 (1972): 558–567. Moshe Idel remains “skeptical about the possibility that these difficult texts were ever delivered as sermons in any synagogue, at least in the Hebrew form that we possess”; “Judah Moscato,” 46. I tend to agree with Robert Bonfil’s assumption that sermons were delivered in the vernacular, though no doubt extended biblical citations and sophisticated Hebrew terms drawn from rabbinic and liturgical texts could have been thrown in, with or even without an accompanying explanatory gloss. On the language of sermon delivery compare Robert Bonfil, Rabbis and Jewish Communities in Renaissance Italy (Oxford: Oxford University Press for Littman Library, 1990), 301–302, and Idel, “Judah Moscato,” 60, n. 28.