CHAPTER 4

Jewish Book Owners and Their Libraries in the Iberian Peninsula, Fourteenth–Fifteenth Centuries

Joseph R. Hacker
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

The strong connection linking Sephardi Jews and the scholars of their communities to the culture of the book is attested to in their writings and their wills, in which they sought to bequeath their association with books to future generations. Their fondness for books was known beyond just Spain and Provence. Thus, when Emmanuel of Rome wanted to describe a wandering bookseller at the beginning of the fourteenth century, he chose to tell the story of a man who came to Italy after having been in Toledo for seven years. According to his description, the man had in his possession a ‘catalogue’ that included 180 books. Whether this is an accurate description or just a fictional account, it is clear that in the writer’s eyes, a person with such a large collection had to have come from Spain. The following is his description:

I was in the city of Perugia in the company of people who possessed wisdom, morality, and understanding. One day, a respectable man named Rabbi Aaron passed by… and he had wonderful books… and he said that he had spent seven years in Toledo and that he brought from there many fine, rare, and expensive books, some in Hebrew and some in Arabic… And he showed us one folio that included a list of his various books, which numbered approximately 180, both new and used… and they were enclosed within locked barrels.1

He goes on to describe how the man deposited the books with them when he went to Rome and warned them not to open the containers. Nevertheless, because of their thirst for the knowledge contained in the books and their curiosity, he and his friends broke into the containers and copied some manuscripts before the man returned from Rome. He makes special mention in his report of several works by Aristotle and the translations of Rabbi Moses ibn Tibbon.

What do we know about the libraries and books belonging to Iberian Jews during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries? This article seeks to clarify two primary points on this matter: 1) Were there Jewish public or semi-public libraries in the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the Middle Ages? If so, where were they, and what do we know about them and their owners?; and 2) What was the nature of the private libraries that belonged to Jews in the Iberian Peninsula and other territories ruled by the Crown of Aragon in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries? How large were they, what did they include, and what can we learn from them about the cultural interests of the Jews in that region?

1 ‘Midrash’: The Public Library of the Jews in the Iberian Peninsula

The question of whether or not there were Jewish public libraries in the Middle Ages has recently been discussed at length by Malachi Beit-Arié. On the basis of the large amount of data in SfarData, he came to the conclusion “that there were no public or institutional libraries even at the end of the Middle Ages, except for modest collections of biblical books and prayer books in synagogues.”

However, as I will try to show below, at the end of the Middle Ages (from the beginning of the fourteenth century) in the Iberian Peninsula and among emigrants from the Iberian Peninsula (after their expulsion at the end of the fifteenth century), there was a framework that made books available for study in a semi-public setting. These libraries were privately owned and were located in the house of one of the affluent community leaders—whether his actual

---

2 The first part of this article is an adaptation and expansion of a section of an article that was published in Hebrew. See Joseph R. Hacker, “Public Libraries of Hispanic Jewry in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Periods” [Hebrew], in From Sages to Savants: Studies Presented to Avraham Grossman, ed. Joseph R. Hacker, Yosef Kaplan, and B. Z. Kedar (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar, 2010), 266–77.

