CHAPTER 7

Le’azim in David Kimhi’s Sefer ha-shorashim: Scribes and Printers through Space and Time

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There are different means to identify the place where manuscripts were copied; the most evident is the colophon inserted by the scribe, which may contain mention of the commissioner, the place, and the date of copy. Other palaeographical and codicological details can help us to localize the area where the manuscript was copied, though without any certainty: these are script, parchment, etc. This study will examine a chapter in the history of a famous text, David Kimhi’s Sefer ha-shorashim, through an analysis of its most vulnerable elements, the vernacular glosses or le’azim. Because scribes and later, editors, as I shall demonstrate, did not consider the le’azim part of the text itself, they did not refrain from adapting them to their vernacular and even from inserting new glosses. In doing so, they acted as Hansel and Gretel, sowing throughout the codices clues about the place they lived in, or the place they came from, and the language they spoke. Beyond this information, the pebbles they left behind also give us clear indications concerning the relationships between manuscripts and therefore constitute a significant contribution for the tracing of a stemma. Through the analysis of some vernacular glosses inserted in a manuscript held in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF), Hébreu 1236, we shall try to demonstrate how these specific elements contribute to a better knowledge of the material conditions in which the copy was made, namely what kind of codex served as a model and which vernacular was spoken in this specific Jewish milieu. The same applies to the printed editions of Sefer ha-shorashim. By exploring some le’azim in the most recent edition of the text (Biesenthal and Lebrecht, 1847), it is possible to better understand the approach and the choices of the editors and to highlight the importance of the first Venetian editions. The last part of this article will be devoted to a unique gloss present in two different codices whose relationship shall be discussed.
1 The Importance of Vernacular Glosses

1.1 Languages in Contact

The Sefer ha-shorashim, which was written in Narbonne (Provence), circa 1210, is extant in about eighty manuscripts, kept in different libraries throughout the world.1 A first survey of twenty-two of the oldest manuscripts indicates that David Kimhi probably had originally inserted 280 Provençal glosses, which reflects the language spoken in Narbonne at the very beginning of the thirteenth century. The dictionary also includes Arabic glosses whose tradition goes back either to Hai ben Sherira Gaon, or to Jonah ibn Janah or even to David Kimhi’s father, Joseph. Finally, Kimhi includes some French le’azim that originated from Rashi’s commentary.

The previously mentioned manuscript, Paris, BNF, Hébreu 1236,2 contains a colophon indicating the name of the copyist, Shem Tov de Faro Sefardi; the name of the commissioner, Judah ben Shalom of Meldola (near Cesena, Italy); and the date and place of the copy, Cesena 1397. The copyist was probably trained in Italy since his handwriting is Italian. Some of the non-Provençal le’azim of this codex are particularly interesting. The vernacular gloss גוּנְטֵיש (guantes)3 for ‘gloves’ sounds clearly Spanish, which is also true of the name of the jay (the bird), גייו (GYYW), which is documented in medieval Spanish.4 However, a clue to better understand the context in which the copy was made seems to be provided by the following phrase, appearing with the root שלו, ‘quail’ (fol. 228r) and which seems to put side by side words with different origins: קולייא ובלשון ספרד קודוריניו (“QWLYY’ and in Spanish QWDWRNYZ”).5 The original Provençal gloss inserted by Kimhi, calha,6 was probably transcribed

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1 To which one must add about 150 fragments (from 1 to 70 fols.) listed in the different libraries all over the world. See the online catalogue of the National Library of Israel, http://web.nli.org.il.


4 Root "עגר (Paris, BNF, Hébreu 1236, fol. 149r). From Late Latin gaius or gaudium. See Corominas and Pascual, DCECH, vol. 3, s.v. “goyo.” The original Provençal gloss was most probably GYYT for gaiet. See Emil Levy, Petit dictionnaire provençal-français (Nimes: C. Lacour, 2005), 300.

5 Old Castilian, coalla; codorniz from Lat. coturnix. See Corominas and Pascual, DCECH, vol. 2, s.v. “codorniz.”

6 Levy, Petit dictionnaire, 60.