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'Be-ôtiyyôt Amsterdam'
Eighteenth-century Hebrew manuscript production in Central Europe: the case of Jacob ben Judah Leib Shamas*

In the manuscript collection of the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana at Amsterdam, one of the greatest Judaica and Hebraica collections in Europe, there are five manuscripts by an eighteenth-century copyist and illuminator of Hebrew manuscripts: Jacob, son of Judah Leib Shamas. This Jacob Leib, who was active between 1718 and 1741, is an important representative of a group of Jewish copyists, sôferîm, which during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was busily engaged in the production of illuminated Hebrew manuscripts, first mainly in Italy and in the Northern Netherlands, but from about 1710 onward above all in Bohemia, Moravia and Germany. One of the interesting aspects of Jacob Leib’s work is the fact that a distinct artistic and palaeographical development can be seen in his manuscripts. In 1987 Iris Fishof was the first to devote serious attention to his work in The Israel Museum Journal,¹ but as curator of the Israel Museum she was necessarily only interested in the art-historical aspects of his work.² Here it is above all the bibliological aspects which are to be discussed.

Jacob Leib and his contemporaries wrote their manuscripts Be-ôtiyyôt Amsterdam, in letters inspired by Hebrew types used in Amsterdam. The feature of copyists basing themselves on printed letters is not an exclusively Jewish one, but in contrast to the situation in their non-Jewish environment the number of manuscripts produced is enormous. As far as Hebrew manuscripts are concerned, it is possible to speak with some justification of a

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school of 'copying copyists' and an estimate of many hundreds of preserved manuscripts is probably much too conservative.

Considering that the manuscripts of Jacob Leib under analysis in this article very much deserve to be examined also in the light of the history of the Jewish book, the actual discussion of his work is preceded by a short history of the manuscript and printed Hebrew book up to his time. In this connection the importance of Hebrew printing at Amsterdam will, of course, be the subject of specially detailed treatment. Seeing that the occupation of copyist always enjoyed particular esteem within Judaism, as seen for example in the existence of an extra-canonical treatise Sôferîm in the Babylonian Talmud—Judaism, like so many religions, attaches great value to tradition and copyists are of course of great importance to a correct transmission of this tradition—and realising that the copyist was only too aware of this esteem, such a historical introduction is very necessary as a framework within which this book-technical study is to be read. The actual case-study comprises a description and evaluation of the codicological and palaeographical aspects—with special attention to scribal development—of the six manuscripts of Jacob Leib to be found in the Netherlands (the five in the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana and another one in the possession of the Municipal Archives in Amsterdam). As the manuscripts were produced respectively in 1718, 1721, 1724, 1728, 1730 and 1741, they can stand as a representative selection from Jacob Leib's production. In Appendix I those facets of the manuscripts under discussion will be put forward which do not rightly belong into the main text, but which are nevertheless of importance to a proper understanding or to the discussion of Jacob Leib's work, while in Appendix II the manuscripts of Jacob Leib not mentioned by Iris Fishof will, finally, be discussed briefly.

MEDIEVAL HEBREW MANUSCRIPTS AND EARLY HEBREW PRINTING

Hebrew manuscripts of the Middle Ages are known only from a relatively late date. The earliest dated Hebrew manuscript is a text of the Prophets, produced in Tiberias in 894/5(?), the so-called Moses ben Asher-codex. Fragments of texts of a certainly earlier date have been found in the Cairo Genizah, a storage place for books no longer in use, discovered in the

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3 The Jewish Middle Ages are often said to come to an end in the eighteenth century, with the start of the Enlightenment; see: I. Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (London 1896), pp. 1f. The year 1540 (5300) is commonly accepted as the latest for calling a Hebrew manuscript medieval. This is the date chosen as the terminus ad quem for the project of dated medieval Hebrew manuscripts; see: C. Sirat & M. Beit-Arié, *Manuscrits médiévaux en caractères hébraïques portant des indications de date jusqu'à 1540*, 1-3, 6 vols. (Paris & Jerusalem 1972-86).