The first use of Hebrew in a book printed in the Netherlands

A great deal has been written about the beginnings of Hebrew typography in the Netherlands during the first quarter of the 17th century. This makes it all the more surprising that the very first use of Hebrew in a book printed in the Netherlands has attracted virtually no attention at all.

We find Hebrew letters being used, though admittedly cut from wood, as early as 1488 in Paulus van Middelburg's Epistola apologetica, printed at Louvain by Johannes van Westfalen (CA 1364). This fact was briefly mentioned by Reed in 1887, and the information was incorporated by Adler in his Gazeteer of Hebrew Printing. In 1924 A. Marx paid some attention to the matter in his article 'Notes on the use of Hebrew type in non-Hebrew books, 1475–1520'. On the occasion of the 300th anniversary of Hebrew typography in the Netherlands, which fell in 1927, S. Seeligmann devoted a few lines to the Hebrew in the Epistola apologetica, and reproduced one page of Hebrew text (f. 7v) from this incunable. So far as I know, these references, none of which are longer than a paragraph, are all that has been published about the first printed Hebrew in the Netherlands.

The Epistola apologetica magistri Pauli de Middelburgo ad doctores Lovanienses bears no date, but it includes a letter from the author dated 27 February 1488 (f. 36v: quarto kalendas martias...). From HPT II, p. 4386 we learn that the work was set in types 1E and 2 of Johannes de Westfalia. The earliest dated use of type 1E was on 18 September 1488 (HPT I, p. 61). So the Epistola apologetica...
was probably published in the autumn of 1488.

Campbell, in his *Annales*, sub No. 1362, mentions another edition of the *Epistola apologetica* by Johannes de Westfalia, published at Louvain in 1484. He goes on to suggest that the 1488 edition was a new edition of this text. There are only two known examples of CA 1362, one in the University Library at Cambridge and one in the Universitäts- und Stadtbibliothek at Cologne. A closer look at the 1484 edition, however, shows that there is no connexion whatsoever between the two little works. In fact I am slightly puzzled as to where Campbell got his title of *Epistola apologetica* for the 1484 edition. It certainly wasn’t from the text. In a note to his description Campbell himself refers to an article by C. P. Serrure. There we find the title correctly given as ‘Prognosticum’. The work is one of a whole series of *prognostica* published by Paulus van Middelburg, and its subject matter is quite unconnected with that of the *Epistola apologetica* of 1488, which deals with the problems touching on the determination of the correct date for Easter. In the catalogue of incunabula of the University Library, Cambridge, Campbell’s error has, in fact, been silently corrected. In the literature on Paulus van Middelburg and his work, however, the picture is somewhat falsified, largely because the 1484 edition was virtually inaccessible to most scholars on account of its rarity.

The *Epistola apologetica* contains two kinds of Hebrew texts. We find on the one hand a number of formulae, which must have been taken from the literature dealing with the Jewish calendar, and on the other a number of biblical quotations, which are used to show that the Vulgate translation is unreliable. In addition, on two occasions a single Hebrew word has been incorporated.

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3 In the introduction to this little work the author calls upon God to help him from making mistakes and asks: ‘rectamque prognosticandi uiam mihi ostende’. (f.a5r). A problem in this connexion is formed by HC 11146, a prognostication by Paulus van Middelburg, without date or place of printing, but assigned to 1484 on the strength of the date given in the introduction, a date which coincides exactly with that in CA 1362, while moreover the *incipit* is virtually word for word the same, only the lineation being different.
