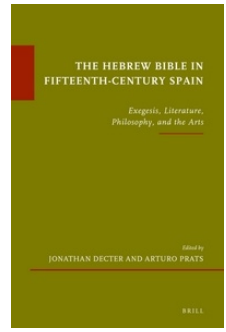
The Hebrew Bible in Fifteenth-Century Spain: Exegesis, Literature, Philosophy, and the Arts, edited by Jonathan Decter and Arturo Prats



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This volume collects eleven contributions read in 2009 at the Centro de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales of the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas in Madrid, as part of the project "Inteleg: The Intellectual and Material Legacies of Late Medieval Sephardic Judaism." The papers present various aspects of the Jewish cultural milieu, as it changed and adjusted to the social changes occurring between the end of the High Middle Ages and the beginning of the Early Modern era, by analyzing literary and artistic productions related in numerous ways to the Hebrew Bible. By dealing with materials produced by different communities (religious and not), not found only in Spain but also in Portugal and in the Italian peninsula, they effectively sketch a lively, multi-religious, multi-cultural depiction of fifteenth-century Southern Europe.

The fifteenth century represents a distinctive stage of Jewish culture and identity in the Iberian Peninsula. The timeframe considered by this volume stretches from the start of the anti-Jewish riots in 1391 to the final expulsion from Spain in 1492, dates which bracket a period marked by uncertainty, but also by cultural renewal. During the previous centuries, in the kingdoms that would later become Spain, Jewish culture had flourished under the patronage of royal figures such as Alfonso VI of León and Castile, who favored the migration of Jewish communities into his lands, or Alfonso I of Aragon and Navarra, who confirmed the rights Jewish people had enjoyed under Muslim rule when they passed under his control. The faiths cohabiting in the Iberian

Peninsula in these years come in contact through collaborative projects, such as the multi-language translation school that retranslated, from Arabic, Greek philosophical manuscripts lost to Christians.[1]

At the same time, however, the movement of Jewish people was restricted by the creation of new legislation. With the beginning of the thirteenth century, religious tensions heightened, helped by zealous Dominicans, who aimed at converting Jewish people, and by debates held in the hope of demonstrating that Jewish belief was inferior, such as the disputation of Barcelona (1263). In 1391, mass persecutions erupted in Seville, set ablaze by the virulent sermons of Ferrand Martínez; they quickly spread to the whole of Castile and then to Aragon, devastating many Jewish communities, through murder or forced conversion. These pogroms had a tangible impact on more than the people they directly affected, rattling also the lives of the Jewish communities that had avoided conversion, and upsetting their internal cohesion.

The following fifteenth century was characterized by a slow worsening of the conditions of Jewish people, sometimes at the hands of recent converts to Christianity, such as the disputes of Tortosa, organized between 1412 and 1413 by *converso* Jerónimo de Santa Fe. The preaching of Vincent Ferrer, too, impacted negatively on everyday Jewish life, as did the influence he exerted on the Ordinance of Valladolid of 1412; such laws limited the movements of Jewish people, their contacts with Christians, and their professions, officially to diminish their influence on Christians and aid the integration of new converts.[2] All these factors contributed to the conversion of many notables, which caused much scandal and disheartening in their communities.

Furthermore, these traumas motivated a strong religious response, not only in the form of new tendencies in biblical exegesis, but also in the creation of non-biblical texts that ranged from elegiac productions lamenting the suffering of the Jewish people, to treatises in favor of or against conversion, to new liturgical corpora. On an interfaith level, contacts could still be pacific and synergistic, or deteriorate into the polemical and plainly antagonistic. This precarious situation ended in 1492, with the edict of expulsion signed by the Catholic Monarchs Isabel and Fernando, which gave four months to Jewish people to either convert to Christianity or leave their land.

[1] Paloma Díaz Más, *Los sefardíes: historia, lengua, y cultura* (Barcelona: Riopiedras Ediciones, 1997), 20–22.

[2] Maurice Kriegel, *Les Juifs á la fin du Moyen Age dans l'Europe Méditerranéenne* (Paris: Hachette, 1979), 216–17.

The volume reviewed is subdivided into four thematic sections: literature and art; Jewish exegesis; conversion and the uses of Biblical exegesis; liturgy and translation. Unsurprisingly, *converso* identity is the center of three contributions, by Claude B. Stuczynski, Ryan Szpiech, and Asher Salah. Stuczynski considers how the spreading influence of Paul's epistles in the Early Modern period takes on a specific weight in fifteenth-century *converso* theology; analyzing different pro-*converso* tracts, the author highlights a shared exegetical trend based on the common importance of their political character, which is justified by their aim in vindicating *converso*s as legitimate Christians.

Szpiech focuses on one of the authors of these pro-*converso* tracts, Solomon Halevi/Pablo de Santa María, to describe the influential narrative of his voluntary conversion, on the eve of the mass conversions of 1391. Dedicated to his son as a testament, this text, written in a language close to Paul, presents an Augustinian reading of the past: an exegetical interpretation of personal conversion allows a positive connection with the past self, highlighting the essential role of the testimony of the Jewish people in God's plan.

Portuguese *converso* (*marrano*) liturgy is the focus of the contribution of Salah. The author starts by summarizing the hypotheses advanced about the origins of these prayers: either a tradition invented after the dissolution of the Inquisition, an actual product of the religiosity of the Jewish people before the forced conversions, or a liturgy emerged from religious expressions common to both Old Christians and *converso*s before the creation of the Inquisition. The author then proceeds to consider if the liturgy in question can be considered a coherent corpus or not, suspending the search for a genealogy and choosing instead to contextualize the prayers in the larger sixteenth-century transformation of liturgy across different faiths, finding connections with contemporary phenomena such as *alumbradismo* and *devotio moderna*.

The anti-*converso* position is given space in the contributions by James A. Diamond and Libby Garshowitz. The former considers the interpretation of Isaac Abarbanel (1437–1508) of the binding of Isaac and the figure of Abraham, in the context of their refusal to give up their Jewishness and their God, as an antidote to conversion. Garshowitz looks at Shem Tov ben Isaac Ibn Shaprut (*ca.* 1340 until after 1405) and his exegesis of Job 19:25–27 in his *'Even Boḥan*, composed to try to curtail the conversions that were sweeping the country.

Ora (Rodrigue) Schwarzwald's and Andreina Contessa's papers analyze literal and artistic productions of Sephardic origin, that is, made by Iberian Jewish communities after their expulsion from Spain. The first considers

Ladino translations of biblical passages found in liturgical texts, and their relation to pre-exilic Spanish Bibles. The Spanish translations display a linguistic variety much higher than the post-exilic ones; the author points to the different targets of the texts as a reason for this difference, concluding that the post-exilic productions were derived from oral compositions. Contessa considers the fabrication of illuminated Hebrew Bibles by Italian Christian ateliers, observing the influence that these latter had on the illustrations and styles of the books.

Tom Nickson's paper traces the history of the late fourteenth-century relief of the murder of Abel found in the cathedral of Toledo. The original image, showing Cain overpowering his brother while sinking teeth in his neck, can be linked to very few artistic trends of the time; the closest similarities are found in the Alba Bible, whose commentaries were provided by Toledan rabbi Moses Arragel, and which was illustrated with reference to the Toledo cathedral's sacristy. While this shared iconography points to a productive encounter between Christian and Jewish conventions, the relief in question became also a medium for Christian anxieties about the Jewish presence. Interreligious connections are also touched upon in Luis M. Girón-Negrón's contribution about the midrashic scene of Joseph's grieving over Rachel's tomb, a theme of either Jewish or Islamic origins, which went on to become successful also in Christianity.

Overall, this volume offers a window onto the complex and multifaceted relations between the different faiths existing in fifteenth-century Iberia, and beyond, thanks to its focus on a text of common interest. The wide range of topics touched by the contributions allows a wide perspective on infra- and intra-religious contacts, the various shapes they took, and the transformations that they underwent during and after the century considered, following the traumatic events that affected the Jewish communities of Spain and Portugal.

Linda Zampol D'Ortia
University of Otago