

The Prophetess Deborah and the Invention of Printing

Michael Pollak

A colophon in one of the earliest dated imprints in the Hebrew language (1475) extols the mystery and power of the newly invented printing press. Seemingly unnoticed by printing and bibliographical scholars working outside the area of Hebraica, the colophon is translated into English and its poetic composition discussed.

Two books, both of which came off the press during the year 1475, share the distinction of being the earliest dated imprints in the Hebrew language of which we know. In one of these, Jacob ben Asher's *Arba Turim*, a four-volume legal code which was printed in the shop of Meshullam Cusi at Piove di Sacco (near Padua) [1, Heb-47], there is a colophon bearing the Hebrew date 28 Tammuz 5235 (= 3 July 1475) which contains ten lines of verse extolling the mystery and the power of the newly invented printing press.¹

The verses of the colophon to the Cusi edition of the *Arba Turim* have been reprinted and/or translated in a number of works specifically devoted to the bibliography of Hebraica or to other aspects of Jewish history, religion, and literature. I have thus been able to find, in books of Judaic interest, two translations of the poem into English, two into German, and one into Latin.² In general, however, the colophon to the Cusi *Arba Turim* seems to have escaped the notice of scholars not directly engaged in Hebraically-oriented studies. It is not found, as a case in point, in Pollard's well known *Essay on Colophons* [8], and I have not seen any description of it in what might be referred to as the "standard" histories of printing.

Like so many other Hebrew literary men of the Medieval and Renaissance eras, the writer of our colophon deliberately imposed upon himself a task of considerable difficulty in the design of his composition. His poem, as he planned it, was to consist of ten lines,

and each line was to end with the bisyllabic sound *e-ret*.³ He would be compelled, therefore, to find ten suitable words ending in *e-ret* which could be fitted in, one by one, at the close of the ten lines of his poem. At the same time he would have to maintain a consistent rhythmic pattern; and, of course, he would also have to present his theme logically and intelligibly. Quite obviously, the challenge he was posing for himself demanded a superior level of poetic skill as well as a highly developed sense of the esthetics of language.

It should be stated that our poet rose to the occasion very creditably. The result of his labors turned out to be a tour de force. The metrical scheme and the imagery are ably worked out, and the rhymes are unimpeachable. Regrettably, however, the same cannot be said about the continuity and the clarity of the theme, for here the composition shows strain. It may be supposed that our poet would have been able to do much better had he not chosen to restrict himself to one basic sound for all of his rhymes.

The problems normally encountered whenever poetic material is to be translated have been compounded in the verses of the colophon to Cusi's *Arba Turim* by the somewhat disjointed arrangement in which the poet is forced to express his thoughts as he tries, also to overcome his rhyming problems. A literal rendition of the poem, it appears to me, would convey the author's intent less aptly than a more freely composed one. Accordingly, the present translation has been prepared primarily with the goal of transmitting the thread of the poet's argument in a form which could be readily understood. At the same time, the attempt has been made to salvage as much of the flavor and the imagery of the Hebrew original as possible, the criterion being that in translation the retained material should in no way detract from the overall theme of the poem.⁴

The allusions in the second half of the poem stem from a passage in the Song of Deborah, specifically from the fourteenth verse of the fifth chapter of Judges. No single explanation of this passage has ever gained universal acceptance among biblical scholars, but one interpretation has the verse implying that the temporal power of the prophetess depended in great part upon the influence being exerted in her behalf by the scribes who were associated with her, and that she therefore adopted the scribal pen as the symbol of the authority with which she had been vested. The author of our colophon uses this

interpretation as a vehicle for pointing out how much political power resides in the written and printed word. Presciently, he leaves his readers, in 1475, with the thought that the newly invented printing press would now become an avenue to power surpassing anything which had been available during the scribal period.

Here, then, in translation, is the self-assured voice of the young and lusty art of printing as it was heard by the author of the colophon to the edition of Jacob ben Asher's *Arba Turim* which was printed by Meshullam Cusi in 1475:

That Art am I which crowns all other Arts;
I am in deepest mystery enshrouded;
For though I write without a pen in hand,
The mark I make is very plain to see.

No scribe am I, and yet I made this book
By human skill, not by miracle:
The ink flowed over me, a moment passed . . .
The text appeared—unruled, but straight and clear.

Does it surprise you, then, that Deborah,
That doughty prophetess of ancient times,
Should choose, instead of me, a scribal pen
To be her emblem of authority?

Yet, had she foreseen how potent were
The churning forces coiled to spring from me,
She would have wrought from them a diadem
To symbolize her awesome majesty.⁵

1. Meshullam Cusi did not live to see his *Arba Turim* completed, but died while the third volume was being processed [2, p. 2], leaving his sons to carry on his work. The colophon to the other Hebrew imprint of 1475, Abraham ben Garton's edition of Rashi's *Perush ha-Tora* [1, Heb-93], shows that it was finished on 10 Adar 5235 (= 17 February 1475). However, the fact that the *Perush ha-Tora* was completed nearly five months earlier than the *Arba Turim* does not necessarily indicate that the *Perush ha-Tora* was the first of the two works to go into production. The *Arba Turim* is a much larger book than the *Perush ha-Tora*, so that it is quite possible that it was started some weeks or months before Abraham ben Garton began to print. It may be reasonably surmised, of course, that both works were in press well before the end of 1474.

2. A translation of the poem into English was provided by Ginsburg in 1897 [3, pp. 779–80]. Another English rendition, published by Amram in 1905, appears to be a reprint from some time earlier than 1905 [4, pp. 25–26]. Loew gives a German-language translation taken from an 1840 issue of the *Literaturblatt des Orients* [5, part 2, p. 190; p. 240, note 837]. Berliner also provides a German translation, in 1896 [2, p. 2]. A translation of the poem into the Latin was made by Father J. B. de Rossi in 1795 [6, p. 7]. (See note 5 of the present study.) There may also be a translation of the verses into the Russian, in Daniel Chwolson's history of early Jewish printing, a work which was issued at St. Petersburg in 1897 and was then translated into Hebrew and published in that language at Warsaw during the same year. I have not seen the Russian edition of Chwolson's book, but our poem does appear in the Hebrew version [7, pp. 6–7]. It seems likely, therefore, that Chwolson included in the St. Petersburg edition a translation of our verses into the Russian.

3. A ten-line poem with a similar rhyming plan—this time with each line ending in the sound *rim*—is contained in the colophon to Gershom Soncino's edition of the Bible, completed at Brescia in May 1494 [1, Heb-10]. Ginsburg reprints a poem from the colophon to a Pentateuch published at Lisbon in 1491 [1, Heb-20; 3, pp. 842–43]. This poem is made up of nineteen lines, each line ending with the sound *ay-im*. It should be noted, however, that Hebrew poets who chose to write in this manner often lightened their tasks by selecting for their rhymes those sounds which occur rather frequently in the language, such as the plural endings for nouns in masculine and feminine genders. The Hebrew literature of the Medieval and Renaissance periods is rich in examples of versification in which the poet intentionally creates compositional challenges of the greatest difficulty in order to display to best advantage the virtuosity and the ingenuity of which he is capable. It was a fairly common practice, for instance, for a poet to weave his name acrostically into his work; in fact, this form of literary derring-do held a peculiar fascination for Hebrew poets of all levels of talent, from those able to write little more than doggerel to those whose verses are still held up as models of great literary achievement.

4. In this connection it should be noted that the verses of the Cusi colophon were reprinted in 1805, on the occasion of the publication of the first Hebrew book at Grodno. It was found advisable at that time to make some minor revisions in the original in order to clarify the flow of thought of the poet and make his meaning more intelligible to the reader. Two words of the text were altered, and the positions of two of the lines were shifted. The result made for a happier understanding of what the poet was trying to say [2, p. 44, note 1].

5. De Rossi's translation of our verses into Latin goes astray at one point because of his failure to recognize that *dalet-beit-vov-reshe* spells out the name Deborah. The error was caused by the fact that there are no capital letters in Hebrew, and thus provides a melancholy illustration of the kind of trap into which even an able scholar like de Rossi can fall when the first letters of the proper names in a language cannot be capitalized. The word *dalet-beit-vov-reshe*, standing by itself, may legitimately be translated either as the proper name Deborah or as "bee." The adjectival term utilized in the text of the poem in connection with *dalet-beit-vov-reshe* means "great," "mighty," "heroic," "doughty," etc., and makes no sense at all when it is applied to bees. De Rossi realizes, of course, that bees do not fit into the text. Failing, however, to think of *dalet-beit-vov-reshe* as a proper noun, he attempts to escape his dilemma by presenting a translation based on the three letters *dalet*, *beit* and *resh*. These letters represent the common Hebrew term for "talk," "discussion," "speech," etc., and appear to him to constitute the etymological base from which the puzzling word *dalet-beit-vov-reshe* derives. In the end, he mistranslates the name of Deborah as *sermo* (he uses, actually, the ablative form *sermone*), thus destroying the effect which our poet has so valiantly and painfully striven to achieve by the devising of an allusion to the biblical prophetess.

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