WHY COMPARATIVE CODICOLOGY?

Hebrew scribes in Europe (particularly in northern France and Germany) started to adopt plummet as a ruling instrument only in the middle of the thirteenth century, at least a century and a half after Latin scribes had started to employ it. For years I have explained this chronological difference with reference to Jewish halakhic considerations. Upon the appearance of plummet in Europe in the twelfth century, Jewish scholars rejected its employment in ruling ritual biblical scrolls (mostly Pentateuch) designed for reading aloud during ceremonies in the synagogues. According to the talmudic law those scrolls had to be ruled, and because in talmudic times they had been ruled by blind ruling, halakhic scholars in Germany, France and Provence, dismissed the new instrument and disapproved of “colour” ruling for ritual scrolls. I formerly ascribed the late adoption of plummet in Hebrew codices to the psychological impact of that rejection, which lasted about hundred and fifty years.

Recently, having compared Hebrew and Latin composite and glossed texts, I have realized that the reason for the chronological gap in the employment of plummet must have been different. The visual presentation of those texts with commentaries, glosses and scholia both in Hebrew and Latin manuscripts, required variable and changeable layout. The development of flexible *mise-en-texte* necessitated a shift in ruling technique from blind or “relief” to “coloured” ruling. While ruling with hard point imposed and guaranteed the uniform layout of at least two sides of each bifolium (or leaf), or even two or more bifolia (or leaves) which are ruled together, the use of plummet and later ink, which had to be applied on each page or each side of the unfolded bifolium separately, enabled flexibility within the inner structure of the text design.

The emergence of a variable configuration of texts in Latin glossed Bibles was generated by scholarly developments and methods of reading and studying in Christian society. Thus, the employment of the plummet as a ruling instrument followed the requirement of conveniently flexible ruling. Similar
intellectual circumstances in Jewish society in northern Europe a century and a half later led the same technological shift and to the adoption of plummet. When Jewish halakhic creativity declined from the second half of the thirteenth century onwards, and compilations, abridgements, glosses, scholia and marginalia replaced coherent works, a similar flexible layout was introduced into glossed books of halakhic corpora. As in Latin glossed books, this integration encouraged the manipulation of decorative configurations, the use of different scripts and the splitting of columns. We can conclude from the comparison of Hebrew with Latin codices that plummet was introduced as a ruling instrument, replacing hard point, because of the growing demand for complex glossed books, rather than being adopted by scribes for some other, technological or aesthetic reason which subsequently encouraged the development of variable layout. To clarify the many other questions raised while attempting to understand the history of book production one would have indeed to resort to comparative codicology.

Only comparative study of similar and even disparate codicological features, styles of book script and their changes in different, similar, opposing or self-contained cultures will offer us satisfactory explanations and understanding. Similar practices in different circumstances would prove that they were not conditioned by social, economic, or cultural context, but were universally inherent in the making of a codex. Similar practices in similar circumstances would prove that they were conditioned by those circumstances, as in the case of the introduction of plummet. Different practices may be the consequence of factors other than technological, such as aesthetic conventions, economic or scholarly needs.

A comparative study of book production in societies which employed the codex form should focus first on common technical problems and the ways different cultures resolved them. Different solutions to identical necessities, and diverse technical procedures achieving the same goals, would require us to re-examine traditional assertions and extrapolations, and question basic assumptions and premises. For instance, different quiring practices in different cultures sharing the same writing materials may refute certain explanations of format and quire construction by folding. A comparison of corresponding functional needs and scholarly developments with concomitant changes in styles of script, design and manufacture of codices, would illuminate the dependence or independence of the changes. Only comparative study of different traditions of book production will enable us to judge whether social or intellectual circumstances entailed those changes, whether they were generated by inherent deterministic technical permutations, or were the outcome of artistic creativity.

Comparative study of different book scripts would concentrate on common structural elements of writing rather than on shapes of letters, as defined by Jean Mallon with regard to the Roman script system: the ductus — the dynamic aspect of executing characters (order and direction of the letter strokes); angle of writing; proportions of height and width of letters, “relative module” (following the modification suggested by Leon Gillissen), and “weight” — the relationship between the width of horizontal and vertical strokes. It should also examine and compare the relationship between book format and text layout and the modular proportions of scripts, and attempt to determine whether letter proportions dictated certain formats and layouts, or were influenced by them. Comparative study of scripts may expose common styles of different scripts, and by so doing enrich our ability to analyze and characterize particular scripts.

The necessity for a comparative approach in the study of Hebrew codices whose methods of production were interwoven with other, major and minor, traditions of book production, is self-evident. The study of the principal codex cultures will surely also benefit from such an approach, for it may reveal cross-cultural influences and borrowings. This is particularly likely to be the case in the border regions and polygraphic societies around the Mediterranean, such as those of Spain, southern Italy and the Near East. Alternatively such an approach may simply provide us with information contained in one culture’s records but pertaining to the history of the book of another culture. I should like to mention by way of illustrations two instances of the latter possibility, drawn from Jewish sources but referring to the history of paper in the Islamic and Christian regions of Europe.

Historians of papermaking and Islamic book production disagree on the date of the beginning of papermaking in Muslim Spain. Valls i Subirà, drawing his conclusions from literary Arabic works, declared that it started about 1056, or even as early as the middle of the tenth century. Van Koningsveld argued that these Arabic texts are late witnesses, unsupported by authentic documents or contemporary sources. He claimed instead that there are reliable witnesses to the beginning of local papermaking only in the middle of the thirteenth century. Two authentic Jewish documents of the middle eleventh century, however — letters written in Judeo-Arabic in Hebrew characters found in the Cairo Geniza — refute the twelfth-century dating and corroborate Valls i Subirà’s claim. In one letter, the writer informs his cousin, a well-known businessman, that he could not find, as requested, an “Andalusian” (i.e. of Muslim Spain) paper of good quality, but rather Syrian paper. In another letter by a religious leader and merchant from Palestine, dating from between 1050 and 1060, the writer requests a certain halakhic text to be copied for him in Fustat (old Cairo), on
high-quality paper, specifying "not Egyptian paper, but Andalusian or that of Tripoli" (now in Lebanon). Both documents explicitly attest not only that paper was being produced in Muslim Spain by the middle of the eleventh century, but that it had already been exported to the Middle East and had acquired a high reputation there.

The other example is to be found in a halakhic book of legal decisions and responsa by a famous Rabbinic authority in the first half of the fifteenth century in Germany, R. Israel Isserlein, compiled by his pupil. The compiler remarks that his master mentioned at a discussion in the yeshiva that in the Gentile courts paper documents were verified by examination of their watermarks. According to Isserlein, documents were sometimes proved to be forgeries when their dates were found to predate their watermarks. In addition to the interesting evidence of a Jewish judicial authority’s familiarity with a non-Jewish legal system and practice, this Hebrew source testifies to the German practice of dating on the basis of watermarks in the early fifteenth century. I wonder whether there are any similar non-Jewish testimonies.

Bridging East and West, Islam and Christianity, Hebrew handwritten books may indeed serve as a useful means for devising a comparative codicology and palaeography. The marginal Hebrew language and script seem to have been used sometimes as a lingua franca for diplomatic communications in the Middle Ages, which Jewish aides in the service of Christian and Muslim rulers might have written and translated upon arrival. Such seems to be the case with the diplomatic epistle sent from the court of Abd al-Rahman III, the first caliph of Muslim Spain, in Cordoba, to a Byzantine Emperor in the middle of the tenth century. A fragment of a later copy of this letter was preserved in codex form in the Cairo Geniza, together with another letter addressed to a Byzantine noblewoman, most probably the Empress Helena, wife of Constantine Porphyrogenitus. Both letters were undoubtedly written by Hasdai Ibn Shaprut, the leader of the Jewish communities in al-Andalus, who was a highly trusted official at the caliph’s court of Cordoba, charged with diplomatic correspondence and negotiations with and missions to European Christian rulers. These letters, like other Hebrew letters by Hasdai, were poetically worded, most probably by his secretary, Menahem ben Saruq, who was one of the earliest Hebrew poets and grammarians in Spain. While the epistle addressed to Empress Helena was a private message from Hasdai on behalf of the persecuted Jewish communities in southern Italy, the epistle addressed to the Byzantine emperor might very well have been an official response on behalf of ‘Abd al-Rahman III to a letter sent by Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus.

Just as learned Jews, scattered over different countries in East and West, helped bridge language barriers in the Middle Ages, so may Hebrew manuscripts, produced in various Muslim and Christian environments and orbits, furnish common grounds for the study of the codex civilization.

Immersed as we are in particularities of each script and in the history of book production, we should nevertheless embark on a quest for a “general” or “universal grammar” of the codex. We should explore the common structural elements, the technical and aesthetic topos, the economic and social conditioning, the functional and semiotic configurations of texts, and the iconography of layout. All of these permeate the making of a codex in all the cultures in which the codex performed the magnificent role of propagating texts and knowledge, preserving cultural continuity, introducing new ideas, and inspiring intellectual and social changes. Witnessing the paradoxical and dialectic process of the unification and dismantling of political structures in our time, and the tremendous prospect of overcoming political, racial and cultural barriers and the menacing national and ethnic fragmentation, the historian of the book can humbly contribute to the universality of humankind by promoting an integrated, transcultural discipline of convergent codicology, and add further common structure and texture to cultural multiplicity.

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